

Preached at the 6.30pm Communion Service at St John the Baptist, Devizes, Sunday 12th May 2019

Church of England Lectionary Gospel reading for 2nd Service: Luke 24:36-49

My brothers and sisters: I would ask that you pray for me that I may speak to you in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus's post-Resurrection appearances in the four Gospels and Acts are fascinating and curious in equal measure. Unlike many other parts of the Gospels, where the same events are described in fairly similar terms – such as we heard just a few weeks ago in Holy Week with the last supper, trial and crucifixion – the appearances of the resurrected Jesus can seem a bit of a rag-bag by comparison. We might feel they are clear and consistent, but that might be more due to the way the Lectionary readings select what we hear. If you go through all the Gospels methodically, the resurrection appearances share some common features, but not many. Let me just summarise them:

The only things that occur in all four Gospel accounts are:

- firstly that an angel (or man, or men) appear to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning;
- secondly, Jesus appears at least once to the gathered disciples; twice in Galilee, otherwise probably in Jerusalem;
- thirdly, all four Gospel writers have Jesus giving the disciples some variation on the great commission to go and spread the good news.

Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene alone in the garden? That's only in John and the longer ending of Mark. Doubting Thomas? Only in John. The road to Emmaus? Only in Luke, in fact, immediately before today's reading – though the longer ending of Mark briefly describes something fairly similar. Even the Ascension is described in just two Gospels; Matthew and John don't mention it at all.

So much for the bald facts. Are there other features in common in the writing? Certainly they are told very matter-of-factly for such miraculous occurrences; in fact, the seeming mundanity of some of the details ('Have you got anything to eat?') can be striking. There are no references back to OT prophecies, even in Matthew which is quite out of character: perhaps this is to suggest that, in a post-Easter reality, prophecies have become irrelevant since they have all been accomplished in the miraculous reality of the resurrection.

So, now let's look at today's reading from Luke. To put it in context, Cleopas and his companion have just had their slightly mysterious encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus and they have run several miles back to Jerusalem where Jesus appears again. There are similarities with some of John's accounts, particularly in the way that the text goes to some lengths to emphasise that Jesus's resurrected body is definitely a physical one, that he retains the scars and wounds of the crucifixion.

Another similarity with John is Jesus's specific act of eating grilled fish.

The only thing today's reading has in common with all the other Gospels is that Jesus appears to the disciples, probably in Jerusalem. But there is something less prosaic but more significant in this reading that is echoed in the others. In all the Gospel accounts, there are specific references to Jesus's followers being, not surprisingly, terrified¹. But then their encounter with the risen Christ that transforms their terror into conviction, their fear into confidence. In our reading from Luke, it is seeing his hands and feet, touching his flesh and bones that achieves this. Unfortunately, this is not much help for us who, as Jesus says in John's similar account, have not seen or touched the physical risen Christ and who have yet come to believe².

Instead, we can take a broader view: we can know we have encountered the risen Christ when we, like the disciples, feel joy and wonder³ and, like Cleopas and his companion⁴, feel empowered and motivated to witness to our faith by our words and deeds, without being afraid of anything.

This might make you feel dispirited: 'I don't feel quite that brave yet – does that mean I haven't encountered the risen Christ in the right way yet? Does that mean I'm not a proper Christian, or a good enough Christian? Help!'

This is where we can return to today's reading. Remember that Jesus's very physical appearance comes directly after his slightly mystical appearance on the road to Emmaus, and I don't think this is coincidental, even though the two vignettes might seem to have little in common. But there is some parallelism going on here – a common device in Hebrew poetry and storytelling, as we see in the OT and especially the Psalms, where there are similarities in the way two things are described and the similarities are intended to show us a connection between the two stories. Parallelism is not something that is common in Western culture which means we can sometimes be blind to it. If you put the Emmaus and Jerusalem appearances side by side, here is what becomes clearer.

Firstly, in both situations, there is an **Encounter**: Jesus appears but is not immediately recognised as the risen Christ. On the road to Emmaus he is mistaken for a stranger, whereas in Jerusalem they think he is a ghost.

Secondly, **Explanation**. Jesus interprets the resurrection for his followers through the lens of the scriptures.

Thirdly, **Eating**. Breaking bread, or the wonderfully specific – and quite mouthwatering – example of grilled fish.

Fourth, **Enlightenment**. Eyes are opened, hearts burn with joy and the living God is worshipped.

Finally, **Exit**. Almost immediately as recognition and reaction happen, in both encounters, Jesus withdraws, vanishes even and the disciples are left to spread the Good News.

How does this parallelism help us in our witness? Well, this common pattern mirrors what we do in our Eucharistic services. At the beginning of the service, we encounter Jesus: he is with us but we might not immediately recognise the fact. Then we have readings from scripture in which the nature of our faith is described or **explained** to us. At the core of the service, in a few minutes from now, right here, we will **eat** – not grilled fish, but bread and wine as body and blood. This merging of our bodies with Christ's can allow our eyes to be truly opened and our hearts to burn with the joy of a deep knowledge of and communion with God. After this, we **exit** but, like the disciples, we are 'changed from glory into glory'. After this, with Jesus within us in a profound sense, how could we not feel powerful and motivated to witness to our faith by our words and deeds, unafraid of anything? Just as with Mary Magdalene and the disciples, this is about to happen to us now. Hold tight: it's life changing.