

During the Easter season we reflect through the readings from scripture on different people whose lives were changed by what took place at that first Easter. They are people who encounter Jesus, risen from the dead who brings new hope and meaning to their lives.

Last week, for example, we thought about Thomas. He was the sort of person who was definitely of the glass half empty outlook. He was both a doubter and a pessimist. He was the disciple who said when Jesus told the disciples that he was going to Jerusalem that it was quite likely they would end up dying with Him there. He was not there when Jesus appeared to the disciples first and he refused to believe until he had the evidence of his own eyes. Jesus appearance when Thomas was in their company as well was the turning point. Now it was for Thomas to see and believe.

In the Gospel for today we move in one continuous sequence from the account of Jesus appearance to the 2 disciples on the Road to Emmaus to their hurried return to Jerusalem where they found the 11 disciples and others with them. The 2 disciples who were not among the original twelve had not recognised the stranger who had appeared to them on the road until they went into the house with Jesus and they realised that it was Jesus Himself only when He broke the bread with them. When the 2 disciples enter the house where the 11 apostles were gathered and tell their good news, they receive good news themselves – “the Lord is risen and has appeared to Simon”, a reference to Simon Peter of course. No sooner have they shared this with the 2 brethren than Jesus is one again in their midst. He gives them the greeting which as Jews they must have been entirely familiar with, “Shalom.” “Peace be with you.” It’s customary among Arabic speakers too, especially to fellow Muslims to say the very same thing in “Salaam, alaykum.” It was all too much to take in for this early Christian company. They knew Jesus had been crucified and here He was among them once more. No wonder they were terrified. In shock the mind tries to make sense of things and some could only think they must be seeing a ghost.

Jesus makes it clear that He is not an ethereal spirit but is constituted of flesh and blood, just as they are. He invites them to look to His wounds to make clear to them that He is the same Person who had suffered on the Cross in the manner that they knew all too well. It’s interesting that this is one of the Resurrection appearances where Jesus takes something and eats it. There is another story in John’s Gospel where Jesus appears to the disciples by the Sea

of Galilee and taking the bread and fish that have been grilled over a charcoal fire He invites the disciples too to eat with Him. Why are the Gospel writers at pains to hold to the truth that Jesus's Risen Body was truly flesh and blood? It may be that what they wanted to do was to refute the heresy that was going around that the Risen Jesus had only a Spirit form. One group that presented a challenge to the integrity of early Christian belief was known as the Gnostics. Gnostics believed they had been especially enlightened and were possessors of a secret knowledge. In essence, what they had done was to take on board a number of ideas which came from Greek rather than Jewish sources which saw the world, the physical stuff of matter, as sinful and inherently evil. God's realm was the spiritual one and purity and salvation could only come about, the Gnostics believed, when the soul had escaped from the prison of the body. This is why the Gnostics went to considerable lengths to call the true humanity of Jesus into question. If Jesus was a flesh and blood human being this could only mean that God was being tainted by the sinful world. That's why the Gnostics embraced barmy ideas like the suggestion that it was Simon of Cyrene who was crucified and the Divine Jesus escaped the fate.

At its root Gnosticism can't accept that this suffering, sinful world can possibly be God's world. Anyway, let's not spend any more time with the Gnostics except to say that by emphasizing the physical reality of the body of the earthly Jesus and His Risen Body the Gospel writers were nailing their colours to the mast – it is the same Lord Jesus who the disciples knew to be every bit as human as they were, who had been raised from the dead.

One of the interesting things in today's Gospel reading is that it wasn't just the eleven and the 2 Emmaus Road disciples to whom Jesus appeared. There were others with them. St Luke doesn't tell us how many or who they were. That makes the story all the more interesting and exciting because we have the freedom to use our imagination and explore all sorts of possibilities.

One thing we can be sure of is that all these people already had their lives radically changed by Jesus. It may be that some of them are people we have actually met in the Gospel stories and we may find at least one person there with whom we can particularly identify because of our own experiences in life.

There might be the rich young man who Jesus told to sell everything, give the money to the poor and follow him. Perhaps for a long time afterwards he thought about what Jesus had said and realised the truth of his words and acted on them. He followed Jesus because he learnt that it's possible for

material wealth to stop you allowing God to fill that empty place in your heart and soul.

There might be the woman who had suffered from bleeding for years until touching Jesus' robe healed her. She followed Jesus because he welcomed and accepted her when she was looked down on by a society who considered her unclean.

There might be one of the people with leprosy whom Jesus made whole or someone lame, deaf and dumb or blind who was given a new life as a result of Jesus's compassion.

There might be a man restored to his right mind after Jesus freed him from mental illness or demon possession. He followed Jesus because he wanted to help rescue others from the living hell he had experienced.

And so we could go on imagining the stories of the people who were in the room that first Easter evening. What they all have in common is that each of them has already had his or her life changed by Jesus. Whether it was through healing, teaching or just his being, Jesus has touched each of them in such a way that they had risked leaving their homes, their work and their families to follow him.

They also had in common the experience of either seeing or hearing about Jesus' betrayal, trial, torture and death. They had all been plunged into the darkness of heart-breaking grief, despair, guilt and fear. At the beginning of that first Easter day they are a grieving, broken community of grieving, broken people. They are frightened and perhaps not even trusting each other. After all, one of their number betrayed Jesus – if he could do that, couldn't others?

Now, in the evening things change and this first band of believers will be transformed. They see Jesus himself as a real living presence. He opens their minds so that at last they can understand all the things he told them while he was alive. He gives them a commission to go out and spread the good news of forgiveness of sins for all who turn their lives around.

The grieving, broken community becomes a joyful, united community – a community with a strong sense of purpose and meaning, sent out into the world as witnesses to the resurrection from the dead of Jesus, the Christ.

Like each of the people in the Gospel story, each of us has our own particular story and we experience the presence of God in our lives in different ways at different times. Like them, we have all learnt about Jesus in different ways. Like them Jesus has touched our lives in a way that has set us off on the journey to follow him, not sure where that journey might lead.

Like them, we may have known the darkness and despair of our own Gethsemane and Good Friday when God seemed a long way away and our faith has seemed pointless, without meaning. Like them, there are times when unexpectedly we encounter the living Christ and our faith is renewed and strengthened.

Perhaps at this point we've covered enough bases in the exposition of scripture during this sermon. I could well end it there but this week I've been inspired to do something I don't normally do, and that's to create a bridge between this sermon and the short meditation I'd like you to engage in with me. What we are doing here through our imagination is to make the link between the experience of the disciples we've been thinking about at the time of that first Easter with our own experience of the Risen Jesus today.

If you'd like to join me, think of this as prayer; reflection; meditation or visualisation; something we're doing together rather than as a sermon I'm preaching to you.

I'd like to invite you to imagine yourselves with me among the company of followers of Jesus on that first Easter evening. *(allow period of silence at each of these points)*

We sit quietly there with the others

Like them we are aware of our own desires and needs,.....

our own strengths and weaknesses,.....

our own successes and failures.....

We sit there with the others, reflecting, waiting and hoping

We become aware of a new presence among us.....

He is different, not like we expected him to be,

not of this world, a stranger.....

Yet he is achingly dear and familiar to us,.....

closer to our hearts than we are ourselves,

in him all our hopes and fears are known and are met.....

His voice says "Peace be with you"

He looks round the room,

meeting the eyes of each person in turn.....

When he looks into your eyes

he conveys the message you need and long to hear.

A message known only to him and to you.

The moment passes.....

and gently we return to today and continue with our service this morning.....

But our lives have been changed.....

and our life together as a community has changed.

It may take time for the full effect of that change to show itself in our lives and in the life of this church but, this year, Easter has changed our lives.

Much of this is my own but the speculation about who was there when Jesus appeared and the meditation at the end I think I drew on from 'Sermons that Work' which is an international Episcopalian resource for preachers!

Steven Ballard