



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

In the midst

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Luke 24:36-48

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." **37** They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. **38** He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? **39** Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself ! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." **40** When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. **41** And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" **42** They gave him a piece of broiled fish, **43** and he took it and ate it in their presence. **44** He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." **45** Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. **46** He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, **47** and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things.

In the period between Easter and Pentecost, we turn our attention to some of the closing words in Luke's Gospel. Throughout this Easter season, we concentrate our thoughts on the appearances of Jesus to his disciples.

Following the unique and powerful account of the Emmaus Road appearance, Luke ends his gospel with a section which shows clearly that Jesus Christ really has been raised, that this is no invention of the mind, and the risen Lord certainly isn't any kind of ghost-like figure.

These verses tell of how Jesus gives the disciples an understanding of what has happened in such a way that will enable them to tell others.

I believe it is important in addressing the end of Luke's Gospel to note that it is one part of a two-volume work, the Acts of the Apostles being the second. So if there's a sense of what one writer called "narrative threads that are left dangling" we can understand this, and the Ascension of Jesus will vitally link the two documents.

We remind ourselves that two followers had encountered the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus and over evening meal they became certain of the Lord. They then quickly returned to Jerusalem to share with the disciples the wonderful news that they had been with Jesus Christ.

This is the setting for these closing words of Luke's Gospel. In fact one gets the feeling that it is one of those significant interruptions of the gospel, as we read, "While they were still talking about this ..." (v.36)

When Jesus comes amongst them, they are unquestionably taken aback. In fact Luke chooses words akin to "startled and frightened". What follows demonstrates that Jesus is not a ghost, as he eats fish with his disciples.

There is no doubt that the risen Christ is alive in another dimension, but his appearance is equally certain for it is in flesh and bones. Here is the mystery and power of the resurrection.

I can only begin to imagine the content of the disciples' conversation as they discussed the events of the first Easter. And so I want to look at this section of Luke's Gospel from three differing perspectives.

HE STANDS AMONG HIS FOLLOWERS

My first perspective is of Jesus standing at the centre of the group of disciples. In their confusion and perhaps even fear, he comes with those wonderful words, "Peace be with you."

This is just what the disciples needed to hear, for it was the antidote to all the unease and fear that inevitably filled their minds and hearts at this time.

From what we read in this section, it is clear that they were troubled and full of doubts. How can we fail to recognise this very fearful experience that they were journeying through?

If the disciples are going to be the witnesses that God plans for them to be, they will need to divest themselves of fear and find for themselves the risen power of Christ.

Some Christians struggle with the fact that the disciples were still experiencing fear, even though they had come to know that Jesus Christ had been raised. It is true that this story records the astonishment, fright, joy and disbelief of the disciples, all in a few verses. The disciples are still behind locked doors.

I suppose the question they were asking themselves was 'How can we understand and speak of a risen Lord who only two weeks earlier had died upon a cross?'

It is an important Christian truth for all his followers that whenever we gather together, purposefully acknowledging who he is, he joins us in our midst. This is not generated by our own enthusiasm, but is a reality which in turn is a consequence of the way he comes to us.

His coming to the disciples following the resurrection is in an altogether different way than they had experienced during his ministry throughout Galilee.

Far too often we misunderstand a Christian concept of 'resurrection'. We easily talk about 'life after death' or 'going to heaven'. Tom Wright very helpfully points out, "But in the Jewish world of the first century it meant a new embodied life in God's new world; a life after 'life after death', if you like."

His compelling argument continues as he talks about a new body which will be given that is not identical to the previous one. In his typically powerful and descriptive language, he writes, "In an act of new creation parallel only to the original creation itself, God will make a new type of material, no longer subject to death, out of the old one."

Our bodies will decay but, in Jesus' case, it happened right away in the most glorious transformation possible. If grasping this is difficult, that shouldn't concern us – because that's just how the disciples were too. What does 'Peace be with you' point to?

- This is a statement of God's mission. As we consider what it is to participate in God's mission in the world, what an assurance it is that he joins us and stands among us. This is not a pious statement to be repeated in an act of worship, but a huge encouragement as Christians have to face challenges. These words would be

especially poignant as growing opposition emerges against those truths and values which are so important to the disciples.

- It is how things will always be. This appearance of Jesus to his disciples shows the meeting of fear and doubt is countered by the living presence of God amongst his people, wherever they are and whatever they are doing.
- It helps us to face our own confusion. There are times when we have to face the fact that it is difficult to see how faith is worked out in our own particular context. I find it helpful to reflect upon the disciples who struggled with some of these issues themselves.

Bruce Larson, the Presbyterian preacher/scholar, suggested, "There is far more evidence for believing that Jesus was raised from the dead than for not doing so." The very nature of the problem that we face in the closing chapters of our gospels shows us that the early disciples had to wrestle with an understanding of the risen Christ. There is no sense of the early Christians taking hold of some kind of myth. It was a sense of boldness that could be seen in their lives and, subsequently, enabled some of them to face crucifixion themselves or being fed to the lions as a result of their faith.

HIS HANDS TELL THE STORY

My second perspective relates to how Jesus meets the terror of the disciples by offering his hands. There is no mention here of the scars that are found in the Thomas account in John's Gospel. This action, in addition to eating a piece of fish in their presence, is clearly intended to dispel any hidden notion that the disciples, or the early recipients of this gospel, may have had which suggested this was merely something in the imagination of the disciples' minds.

The presence of Jesus Christ in art and in visual presentations of any kind is always interesting. I am always concerned to ask what the artist or writer is saying about Jesus. But it seems to me that any presentation of Jesus Christ will need to deal with the important marks of the crucifixion and what they represent for us all.

We remind ourselves that in John's account of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene didn't immediately recognise the risen Christ; neither did the disciples in the Upper Room nor the two on the Emmaus Road. His hands, feet and voice will give a message that it is unmistakably him.

We could helpfully consider the message that is given by hands. You can tell a great deal about a person by examining their hands – and I am not talking about superstition or fortune telling. Hands often indicate what kind of living a person exercises day-by-day.

When as an ordained minister I have the immense privilege of conducting Holy Communion, I am presented with many hands. There are the delicate hands of children, the antiseptically clean hands of a doctor, the auto mechanics' hands, those with arthritis and often the nervous hands. Into all these hands, God is able to deliver his gift of life in bread.

What would Jesus' hands have been like? I don't believe they would have been silky white or satin smooth. I know, however, that his hands that bear the imprint of hard nails are strong, sensitive and loving hands.

- He offers his hands. We know how important it is when we meet someone for the first time; there is in our own culture an offering of hands. However, when Jesus offered his hands, it would reveal what had happened to him and, of course, Who he is.

- His hands take the fish. We could easily pass this by and fail to grasp the truth that his eating fish offers to us. Apparitions don't eat and, at the same time, there is a very clear echo of Jesus distributing at the Lord's Table. Barclay was quick to point out, "Christianity is not founded on the dreams of men's disordered minds or the visions of their fevered eyes, but on One who in actual historical fact faced and fought and conquered death and rose again."
- His hands demonstrate his love. This broken, defeated and demoralised group of disciples would find that this is proof-positive not only of his resurrection but of his friendship and love.

Some people have great difficulty in believing God actually cares for them and are often more comfortable with an impersonal understanding of God. This is displayed by folks who are satisfied with God as the first cause, for example 'the ground of being' or 'a source of life' or even power, but with no loving personality. The idea of a God with nail prints in his hands and feet challenges what is ultimately a deficient and partial understanding.

These disciples had a living memory of his ministry. His words would be imprinted upon their minds and they had closely observed the compassionate and healing ministry of our Lord. But now this memory is infused with a present encounter, which when alloyed to the memory would empower them not only to observe the story his hands told, but also allow their own hands and lives to tell.

HE SURPRISES HIS FOLLOWERS INTO ENGAGEMENT

For me, the element of surprise is an important gospel message. They were certainly surprised by joy. This is not something they had expected. It was more than likely the furthest thing from their mind.

Luke has already shared with us the result of that walk to Emmaus and how the two followers were changed when they saw Jesus take bread, give thanks and break the same bread in their presence. As he handed it to them, so their eyes were opened and they recognised him. It caused them to ask the question, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (24:32) This resulted in an immediate response, as they got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.

There are similarities in the passage before us, for we are told that they are filled with joy and amazement, but are also told "they still did not believe it". (v.40)

There is an urgency in the task for which these disciples are being prepared in the closing account of the ministry of Jesus.

The Christian community, like the disciples themselves, must not stay hidden in an Upper Room – for our mission is surely to reach out to the world.

More than any of the other gospels, Luke sees the resurrection accounts as a starting point to understanding the mission of Jesus as it was handed to the disciples. And just as Jesus was anointed for his ministry (3:22 and 4:18-19), so the disciples will be. This of course is the promise of power that will be theirs through Pentecost.

- He opens hearts and minds. In both the Emmaus Road account and in the Upper Room encounter, there seems to be a wonderful combination of heart and mind being stirred to a new sense of purpose. The great secret of the power of the Holy Spirit, which he had told them about, is now becoming real. Their waiting in Jerusalem was a time of anticipation, but very soon the power of God would be upon them.

- The relationship between scripture and mission is encapsulated for me in the instruction to stay in the city and wait for the gift of the Spirit. This is a special kind of waiting – full of wisdom and certainly not the prevarication that so often defines a church limping towards its purpose. Whenever we are waiting for God, such time is never wasted. Jesus not only convincingly ate broiled fish, he also deliberately talked to them about what had happened and directed their minds to the scriptures, as he had done on the Emmaus Road. A link is developed between the scriptures (v.44), their minds (v.45), his mission (v.46) and the mission that from then on would become the disciples' (v.48-49).
- The link and relationship between the risen Lord and the gift of the Spirit is critical to our study of the New Testament and, in particular, the gospels and the mission of the church. Whenever we talk about the Ascension, we realise there is something of the mysterious about it, because we are seeking to put into words something that is beyond description. When Luke's Gospel is partnered with the Acts of the Apostles, there is both an end and a beginning and Jesus Christ is at the centre of both.

Both on the Emmaus Road and in the Upper Room, Jesus comes when the followers and disciples least expect it. To these startled and terrified people is addressed an invitation (v.v. 37-39). Was Jesus saying, 'Check the vital signs and you can see I am alive'?

The celebrated and gifted Scottish preacher, Arthur John Gossip, said, "You will not stroll into Christlikeness with your hands in your pockets, shoving open the door with a careless shoulder. This is not a hobby for one's leisure moments, taken up at intervals when we have nothing much to do, and put down and forgotten when our life grows full and interesting."