



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Third Sunday of Easter – April 18, 2021

Scripture Passages: Acts 3:12-19, Luke 24:36-48

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A good friend to our diocese, Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, once pointed out to a room full of clergy at a conference in which he was the speaker, that there is a lot of humour in the Bible. I have to say I was a bit skeptical at first. But he went on to give us several examples – which were laugh out loud funny actually. It's all in how you tell it. That was a bit of a revelation and has given rise in me to a tentative but lovely freedom to see that in the biblical text. I agree with him that especially when describing human reactions to God's presence the scriptures can be funny. And this post-resurrection appearance of Jesus seems to prove the point.

Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

Why are you frightened? Why do you doubt? Are you kidding me?

You sir, are supposed to be dead.

It's said by either Mark Twain or Benjamin Franklin – those two great and very quotable men, that the only certainties in life are death and taxes. That's true for most of us I guess.

But then you get the Resurrection and suddenly we're into different territory.

Personally, in the light of Easter, I'm a little more comfortable with a quote from Francis Bacon – 17th century philosopher – who said, "if a man will begin with certainties, he will end in doubt. But if he will be content to begin with doubts, he will end in certainties."

And that's just how the scriptures tell it, isn't it? The disciples all begin with doubts. And then they work their way toward certainty. Jesus invites them to see his wounds – to touch them even. And just in case they were still not convinced the scriptures say, that “while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.”

And that clinches it because ghosts don't eat fish. He's alive – powerfully and differently – but he's alive.

Then this resurrection appearance – just like all the others to Mary Magdalene, and Thomas and Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus - moves from convincing “the eleven and their companions” that he really is the risen Christ and not a ghost, to opening their minds to understanding why that's significant. As I often say, when God shows up, everything changes.

And where does he go to do this? To the scriptures.

As one commentator – a translator of the Greek has written, the version of this encounter goes more like this: Jesus then set about mind-blowing their minds to mind the scriptures. It doesn't quite work in English, but you get the feeling of what happened: Jesus set about mind-blowing their minds to mind the scriptures.

Jesus takes them on a journey - one that moved from the realities of profound disappointment and brought them to new a dream, a new reality. For that's the truth of the Gospel. The presence of Jesus always and ever moves us on, gives us purpose and renews our spirits – and reframes our reality.

I heard and saw that powerfully this week, in his Highness, Prince Philip's funeral. That I think is something that Prince Philip understood well. I was so touched and full of admiration for his decision to forgo either eulogy or sermon in his funeral in favour of allowing both scripture and the liturgy to speak of his faith and about who God really is. That to me was a brave and crystal clear statement that he knew that his – and our - faith really does reframe our lived reality.

Jesus took the disciples on a new journey and showed them that the story of his life and death and rising again was a new interpretation of texts which they already knew; he opened their imagination, so that they might begin to live differently – through the lens of a transformed reality.

And this is what he said: that it was necessary for all the writings in the law of Moses and in the prophets and the psalms concerning him to be fulfilled. And that the “Christ is to suffer and to rise out of death on the third day, and repentance into the release of sins is to be preached in his name into all the nations.”

So Jesus helps them to look backward and forward: to the fulfillment of scripture and prophecy but also to something new. And there's a reason for that - because he was getting them ready for a new job - and it's this: Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things."

Okay, so those are the two things that are very important about this encounter in the Gospel of Luke. First Jesus points to the crucial role of scripture: "the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms" for understanding what God has been doing through Jesus's life, and death and resurrection. The fulfillment of the scriptures give meaning and foundation to this otherwise unbelievable story. That's the first thing. Very important.

And the second thing is the fact that Jesus calls the disciples to be witnesses. In fact, in Luke's Gospel, he describes the disciples as witnesses or as people who testify seventeen times!!

That means something really significant about who believers are to be. And we hear that today in Peter's speech from the Acts of the Apostles. Peter reminds those people who were amazed at the healing of a lame man in Jesus' name, from whom the power came to do such a thing - of course it's Jesus. And he witnesses to Jesus' power in his life.

You know, it's worth remembering that if these disciples had failed to bear witness, we would never have heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Disciples as one commentator has written, "are the living evidence of the power and the wisdom of the gospel."

The job of any witness is to share what you know through your own experience. A witness in a courtroom does this. It's for the hearers to decide to make of it what they will.

And anyone hearing this witness for the first time is very likely to react with astonishment and disbelief. Even Jesus' disciples didn't truly know him until he showed them his wounds. Why such difficulty in believing? Well, I think it's because we can only understand things that fit plausibly into the structures we use to make sense of anything. As the Christian writer Bishop Lesslie Newbigin pointed out: "the story of the empty tomb cannot be fitted into our contemporary worldview, or indeed into any worldview except one of which it is the starting point." So our doubt, and that of the disciples, is only to be expected. Because Jesus is reconstructing our worldview into one that takes his empty tomb as its starting point.

You see when Jesus calls the disciples to faith, he's actually inviting them to enter into a whole new world. And what underpins that new world is another resonance from scripture: For with God nothing is impossible! Maybe we'll hear that and remember that that is what the angel Gabriel said to Jesus'

Mother Mary at the annunciation. Jesus' birth and his resurrection are possibility altering events.

So how are we to understand these stories of Jesus' post resurrection appearances? – because it's very clear that they are important. Well, I think we are to follow the example of what the first disciples did.

So, when they understood the revelation of Jesus – like when it settled into their bones, when their hearts were burning with the recognition of the truth, that he was who he said he was, in the very next verses he tells them that they are witnesses to all this, or rather they are to witness to these things.

And that is exactly what we see Peter doing in Acts – at the end of his great and brave speech – speaking out – risking his reputation – risking his safety even – saying that Jesus is the Messiah – that it had all been God's plan.

Immediately after he receives the Holy Spirit, he is out on the road telling people about Jesus, healing people in the name of the Messiah – opening the scriptures to them, and making other hearts burn.

And isn't that the truth of all good news – of the Good News? It is axiomatic that once we have received it, we have to tell people about it. The message we receive from Jesus, but also from Thomas and Cleopas and his fellow disciple, is the same one that Jesus gives to Mary Magdalene, and all the disciples and that is “tell people”

It's a clear, unambiguous message: “tell people.” Tell them that the dead are raised, their sins are forgiven and we are all set right with God, and most importantly – we are all loved by God.

It's pretty clear that that is the content of discipleship post-resurrection. It's not just to learn about how to follow Jesus – it's to take that learning and tell people. And I think that shows us that we aren't called to be passive as followers of Christ. Jesus calls his disciples -- then and now -- to be witnesses to what's happened. Witnesses that it was God's plan of salvation, witnesses to a new present and future. Witnesses to the fact that even our pasts has been rewritten. We are called to be witnesses to what God has done -- and is still doing -- for us and all the world in and through Jesus.

But here's what I think is particularly poignant and so helpful and literally empowering – what literally gives us strength – and what just rings so true about what the disciple's experience must have been: in Luke's description of this scene, even though the disciples don't yet believe -- or at least they experience faith as this mixture of joy and doubt and wonder -- they are still called to be witnesses! They doubt, but they're still witnesses. They're confused, but they're still witnesses. They're nervous, but they're still witnesses.

And if that's true for them, well, then, it's true for us too. Being resurrection or Easter people, means being a witness, even if we're in a state of joy and doubt and wonder. And that gives me a lot of comfort – and courage too.

Okay, so having said that, I know the word "witness" frightens a lot of people. We don't think we can witness, or have had a bad experience on the receiving end of someone else's witness, or don't know what we'd say or ... and the list goes on. But here's the thing. I actually think we do witness or let's use a different term, tell people things all the time, and that's good news because it means we've had practice at this.

We bear witness to things that are important to us. We bear witness to the great movies or (in lockdown especially) to the great, distracting Netflix series we've seen and want others to enjoy. We bear witness to the accomplishments (or failures) of – in my house - soccer or rugby teams. We bear witness to the important events in our family or work lives. We bear witness to profoundly important issues of real importance - justice, injustice - in our time. We bear witness -- that is, tell people about -- the things that matter to us all the time.

Here's the thing: It's no different when it comes to the faith. It really isn't.

I'll tell you what witnessing does not mean: witnessing does not mean being aggressive or anti-intellectual. It does not mean being judgmental, it does not mean being defensive.

I'll tell you what it does mean. It does mean living a Christian life with integrity. That's an important avenue of witness, but there's more, because in a post-secular age, people don't automatically make that implicit connection between loving service to neighbour and Christian faith. We have to make it explicit – to bear witness.

Bearing witness to the Christ is sharing with others where we find meaning in the midst of a Pandemic, where we have sensed God at work – giving hope in what feels like a hopeless time. Bearing witness is sharing where you think God is at work in goodness, and love and mercy in your life and in our communities. It's simple you know. It's not always easy, but it is simple.

When we do that, we're living out a very important aspect of discipleship – we're sharing the story – the story of God's love, the story of how God lives and works in our lives. That's being Eastered.

And this is how the church grows. This is how it's always grown. It's the only way it has grown. There is no plan b. This is it. This church for which we all care so deeply, grows by our witness to Jesus Christ. This is what it is to follow the Christ. We get to tell people where and how God is working in our lives, in our communities and our world.

As one commentator put it, “Easter people witness. Easter people witness, perhaps not yet with great confidence, but who knows -- before long, maybe we, too, in our joy and while disbelieving and still wondering, can hear and respond to Jesus' call to be his witnesses.”

Because even though we begin with doubt, we end in certainty.

And it's important to remember that we do not witness alone, as the first post resurrection stories tell us. We don't witness alone today either, we sit amongst a community of fellow believers – all you who are participating in this service are part of the cloud of witnesses. Think about that: thousands of witnesses watching right now with you.

We do not witness alone. But Eastered people do witness. End. Of. Story.

Or should I say, and that's just the beginning,...?

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.