

Brancepeth Sermon

8 April 2018 – Easter 2

Acts 4:32–35; 1 John 1:1–2:2; John 20:19–end.

Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.

Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,

that we may serve you today and always. Amen

If anyone asked you this morning, as you were chatting before the service, ‘Did you have a good Easter?’, I hope you fixed them with a Paddington-like hard stare, and said, “‘Had’? What do you mean, ‘had’? It’s *still* Easter. In fact, it’s going to be Easter for rather a long time to come. It’s true that what we call the *Octave* of Easter finishes today – that only runs from Sunday to Sunday. But *Eastertide* – the full Easter season – runs all the way through to Pentecost. You may ask me whether I “had” a good Easter on the day after Pentecost, Monday the 21st of May, and not a moment before.’

Now, it is possible that I might be overestimating
the liturgical precision you try to bring to your pre-service
conversations – in fact, I rather hope I am –
but there is an important point here.

We are *still* celebrating Easter –
and we have weeks and weeks to go.

In fact, it's more than that:

The church is *always* celebrating Easter.

Sometimes, people like to say that Day of Pentecost is
'the birthday of the church' –
because that's the day
when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples,
and something new was made of them.

But if you ask me, *Easter* is the birthday of the church –
because the church is
the community created by the news of Jesus' resurrection.

We are those people who have heard the message of Easter,
who believe it, who are changed by it,
who hold on to it – and who pass it on.

That's what the church is; that's *all* the church is.

We're resurrection people.

Look at our passage from Acts.

Acts is a book that tells the story
of the very early years of the Christian church.

And in the early chapters, the central theme of that story is
the preaching of the resurrection.

You could sum up the whole presentation Acts gives
of how the church got started
in that verse that we heard read:

'With great power the apostles gave testimony
to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,
and great grace was upon them all.'

The apostles – Jesus' earliest followers –
preach the resurrection to those around them in Jerusalem,
in the surrounding towns,

and then on and out to the rest of the known world.

You all killed Jesus, they say – you all called for his death
but God raised him, and gave him back – and he *forgives* you.

We abandoned him, they say – we ran away and left him

but God raised him and he came back to us –

and he commissioned us in his service

to spread his forgiving love.

That's what gives birth to the church.

That's what starts the whole generations-long journey of the
Christian church going.

We are simply the fellowship, the community,
of those who have heard, and who go on hearing,
this message of forgiveness and commissioning.

God has raised Jesus from the dead;

he comes to us forgiving us, and commissioning us.

But what does it mean for us, here,

to be a community of the resurrection?

To begin answering that,

I want you to notice one thing, about the message of the resurrection passed on in all our readings.

In the Gospel of John, with that story of Thomas,

doubting Thomas –

well, Thomas got to see the truth of the resurrection:

Jesus, right there in front of him, in the flesh.

What that story stresses is that this resurrection

happened in the flesh, in the world of touch and sight,

of hands and torsos,

of bodies and scars.

We are called together, we are made into a church,

by something that happens

right in the midst of the real world, the physical world,

the ordinary world of bodies and things, transforming it.

Our passage from 1 John, stresses the same thing.

the author emphasises

that he has heard, that he has seen with his own eyes,

that he has touched with his hands, this life, this new life.

It was something tangible, something graspable,
something right there in front of him.

It was not just a spiritual message,
it was a *living, present, visible, tangible reality*

So this life, this physical life, this ordinary life
the life we live right here in the real world –
it has been changed.

This life, *our* life.

The church is the community of those who know
this world differently,
who are meant to live in it differently, because they've seen,
they've heard, they've touched the risen Lord.

Of course, Jesus tells Thomas that
'those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'
are also blessed.

And that's clearly us.

We've not seen the risen Jesus face to face.

We've not been able to reach and and touch him

and confirm that he's really there.

We operate by faith, not by sight, not by trust, not by touch.

But that doesn't mean that what was for them physical,

something they could touch and see

and hear and smell and taste,

becomes for us a spiritual message,

something to do with our souls, our spirits, our minds,

but not with our bodies,

not with the real and ordinary stuff of our lives.

No.

The message of the resurrection is about the transformation

that God can work in our real lives

tangibly, visibly, audibly

right in the ordinary stuff of our lives.

Look how that line in Acts about preaching the resurrection

is sandwiched between two others.

Luke says that 'The whole group of those who believed

were of one heart and soul,

and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions,
but everything they owned was held in common.’

Then comes the line about proclaiming the resurrection.

And then ‘There was not a needy person among them,
for as many as owned lands or houses sold them
and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

They laid it at the apostles’ feet,
and it was distributed to each as any had need.’

These things just go together for Luke: this community’s
proclamation of the news of the resurrection,
and their *radical way of life.*

They believe the message – and so they live like this.

They proclaim the resurrection – and so they live like this.

Their message was not just in words,
it was in their life together,
in the way they handled their possessions,
in what they did with their money,
in the care they have to the needy.

They made the message of the resurrection tangible,
they made it visible, they made it audible,
they made the new life into which God was raising them,
with which God was filling them,
something that those around them could see, hear, touch.

Look, they said. New life is possible, right here, right now.
God has given us new life to live,
right here in the midst of ordinary life.

And the new life they displayed –
I don't think there's any point trying to tone it down;
you can read the words just as well as I can –
the new life they displayed was pretty radical.

They started a commune.

They abandoned personal property.
They lived out that slogan
'from each according to his ability,
to each according to his needs'.

That's the difference they thought this message made.

That's the way they thought they could make this new life,
this resurrection life,
visible in the world.

The time of separated lives,

The time of thinking that the deepest truth about the world
is the scarcity of resources
the struggle for survival;

The time of lives lived in competition with one another,
of making and keeping hold of your own pile,
of thinking that your own possessions
are what you've earned and deserved,
and yours to dispose of as you wish –
that time is *over*; that way of living is now *dead*.

They knew themselves commissioned to live
a *different* kind of live,

to display, to proclaim to the world a *new* kind of life –
a life whose first rule is love for one another.

They weren't simply pointing to some future,
spiritual existence,
they were trying to display that new life
right here in the midst of things,
tangible, visible, radical.

Now, I've not sold all my possessions
and given the money to the church.

Come to my house, you'll see I've pretty obviously
not entirely given up on the idea of private property –
at least, not the idea of *my* private property.

I don't live like those disciples in Acts –
not in any very visible way.

But I've been thinking hard about this,
and I don't think it's right to finish this sermon by
trying to take all the sharp edges off this example for you,
to make it easy for us all to swallow.

I'm simply going to say that

the church, *our* church

is created by the message of the resurrection.

We are called to *live* the message of the resurrection,

in the here and now, with our bodies, with our money,

with our possessions, with *everything*.

And it is a message that does change *everything*,

that does challenge all our old ways of doing things.

The disciples in Acts were convinced it meant

a whole new way of begin community, of living communally

– a radical reshaping of attitudes and practice.

What do *we* think it means?

What does it mean for us, here and now?

How will we live that same message,

that same resurrection life,

life by a new set of rules –

life governed first and foremost by love for one another –

by a refusal to play by the old rules –

how do we make *that* life,
resurrection life,
audible, visible, tangible,
in our lives here?

I don't know. I really don't know.

I don't have any answers to offer to you.

But I do know that passages like this one in Acts
pose the question to us,
sharply and uncomfortably.

And they make me realise how unsettling
how dangerous,
it might be to pray:

*Lord God our Father, raise us up to new life together in your love,
in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.*