

Brancepeth Sermon
23rd April 2023

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Acts 2:14a, 36–41

Luke 24:13–35

Psalms 116:1–3, 10–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

Over the past three days,

you have been *furios*, you have been *shocked*,

you have been *terrified*, you have been *horrified*,

you have been *grief-stricken*, and you have been *incredulous*.

But now, overlaying all of that, you are feeling *humiliated*.

There was *meant* to be an insurrection happening,
and you were *meant* to have been a part of it.

You were expecting by now, to be in the thick of it,
perhaps already celebrating victory, perhaps fighting,
or perhaps, yes, nobly sacrificing yourself.

You were expecting heroism, and you were expecting marvels
– not this pathetic, scurrying flight into hiding.

A week ago, you were part of something *alive*.

You were striding into Jerusalem behind Jesus
and the crowds were calling out to him
and envying you your position beside him.

You were striding *into the capital city*
right in front of the Romans,
and right in the face of the collaborating Jerusalem elite,
and they could do nothing about it
because the whole city was on *your* side.

An uprising was coming,
and everyone felt it,
and *you* were a part of it.

The authorities couldn't even stop you
when you all walked, as boldly as you liked,
right into the temple precincts,
and Jesus started pitching over tables,
and driving out the functionaries of the powers that be,
and *nobody* could stop him, nobody *dared* stop him.

You thought it might all have kicked off *then*,
and though it didn't, not that day,
you knew it wouldn't be long coming.

It was supposed to be a revolution,
and you were meant to be right in the midst of it,
and, yes, it was terrifying, but it was also *exhilarating*,
and you knew that it was going to end well,
whatever it might demand of you,
because your leader could walk on water,
he could command the weather,
he could raise the dead.

Nothing was going to stand in your way for long.

And then, on that night in the olive grove,
with his *incomprehensible* weeping and pleading,
with the kiss of a traitorous friend,
with the soldiers and the torches and the swords –

your invincible, unstoppable leader,
your mesmerising, commanding leader,
was arrested in front of you,
and turned out to have no power to resist it,
no power even to delay it,
and *everything had changed*.

You fled, and you hid.

And, yes, you betrayed him,
but only because he had betrayed you,
all his promises turning out to mean nothing.

And so far, there have been no more arrests,
but it is only a matter of time.

Everyone knows that you had been building towards insurrection.

Everyone knows that you all Galileans were a part of it.

And now the only person who kept you safe is gone.

No wonder you all ran away.

No wonder you have all been in hiding.

Jesus turned out to be too *weak* to save you.

And so, this morning,

after two days hiding in a supporter's back room,

not knowing whether they still really were a supporter,

not knowing, with every noise outside,

whether your own journey to a cross had begun,

a journey unlikely to include the luxury of a trial,

you and Cleopas decided to get out.

You risked walking through the streets,

well wrapped up, making yourself small,

and passing through one of the lesser gates,

hoping not to have to talk,

and betray yourselves by you Galilean accents.

You expected every moment to be recognised and stopped.

And even now, with six miles between you and the city,
you are fighting the urge to break into a run.

You and Cleopas had been silent at first,
until you were out and alone,
but since then you have been talking bitterly,
asking how you could have been so wrong,
how everything could so suddenly have turned to ash.

And then, just a moment ago, with a lurch in you stomach,
you had realised that *you weren't alone*.

You had been so absorbed in your acidic discussion
that you hadn't heard this man come up behind you.

And, of course, the moment you became aware of him
you both clammed up, instantly,

but it was too late,
and it just seems to have made him suspicious,
or at least worryingly curious.

He has asked what you were upset about.

And Cleopas, *stupid* Cleopas, before you can stop him,
making your heart freeze within you, is answering him.

‘Are you the only stranger around Jerusalem’,
Cleopas says, sarcastically, ‘who does not know the things
that have taken place there in these days?’

‘What things?’ the man says.

And so Cleopas tells him,
and once he has started, his bitterness won’t let him stop.
In a moment, he’s telling the stranger about Jesus,
about the people following him, and hanging on his words,
about everyone’s expectation
that there was going to be an uprising,
and an end to the rule of Rome and Rome’s lackeys.
And Cleopas’s explanations are getting louder,
and he is becoming less cautious with every moment,
and *he will not catch* your terrified eye.

Cleopas is saying: ‘We really thought he was the one;
that this was the time when everything would change
– but now they’ve killed him.

And they’ve even destroyed his body, to make sure.

Some of the women in our group went to the tomb, and said
– oh, I don't know what they said,
they said all sorts of strange things,
but it's clear that even the body has gone.
And so we're getting out of there.'

There's a silence. Then:

'What did you expect?' says the man.

'What do you mean?' you answer.

'What did you expect?', he says again, more slowly.

'Haven't you *read* your scriptures?

Don't you *know* the stories?

From righteous Abel all the way down to

Zechariah son of Barachiah,

this is what happens to God's messengers here.

It's what this world does to them.

They come proclaiming God's holiness,

God's glory, God's love,

and you kill them.

Did you really think that the Messiah would
shy away from all of that, or that he'd be let off more easily?

Did you *really* think that he would hide away from it
or avoid it?

The messiah's mission was *always*
to proclaim the kingdom of God –
the love of God, the justice of God –
and to proclaim it not just in the backwaters
and in the side streets
but in the capital, to the people in power,
in the courts of the temple
and the palaces of kings and governors.

Did you really think that this Jesus of yours,
if he really was the messiah, would refuse that commission?

Did you really think he wasn't prepared to pay what it cost?

His path led *through* that, not away from it.

It was always going to have to be that way.'

Now, it should be odd, shouldn't it:

this stranger – someone who had seemed
not to know anything about what was going on at first –
pretending to be able to explain it to you,
and doing so with such confidence.

It should be suspicious. You should be scared.

But you want to hear more.

Everything is so dark, so completely fouled up,
that you are willing to listen to *anyone*
who thinks it made sense.

And then he carries on.

'And don't you get the point', he says,
'of what happened this morning,
what the women in your group found and heard?
I know you're not used to taking women seriously,
but you really should have listened to their testimony.'

Don't you get that God would not let death
be the end of this story?

Didn't your Jesus tell you at least that much?

God sent him to proclaim this message of life,
even to those in power,
even if it cost him his life,
even though it was *bound* to cost him his life –
but *God was on his side*. God was *always* on his side.

God is *still* on his side.

And God isn't about to face defeat.

God has vindicated Jesus,
just like he said God would.

Again: just read your scriptures!

God will not let his holy one see decay –
not the bearer of God's own message,
the bearer of God's own life!

So I think you're going to find that the women were right –
you really should have listened to them, you know –

I think you're going to find that this Jesus
– is alive.'

You don't know what to say.

You don't know what sense to make of his words,
though something very strange is going on inside you.

But you have reached Emmaus now,
and Cleopas' house is right there beside you –
and there's not going to be a chance to hear more.

Except that Cleopas has clearly been hanging on his words
as closely as you have, and he says,

'Stop with us a while. My house is just here;
at least have a bite to eat with us before you carry on.'

And the man says, 'Yes.'

And for a while he doesn't say more.

Cleopas gets water for you so that you can wash your sore feet.

He gets out a wineskin and some cups,
and then disappears to get some fresh bread from a neighbour.

The stranger is quiet all this while,
just tending to the ordinary needs of life.

But then, when Cleopas returns, the man speaks again.
‘Could I say the prayer over this bread?’, he asks.

‘Yes,’ says Cleopas, ‘please do.’

‘You know,’ the stranger said,
‘this man you were following, this Jesus:
his whole life was dedicated to
proclaiming the kingdom of God,
to living its life in the world,
even though it would cost him everything.

He lived a life filled with the love and justice of God
in a world that doesn’t know what else to do with that
except destroy it.

And *now* God has raised him from the dead
because God will not let him go,
God will not let the life that he bears be defeated,
whatever happens.

And didn't this messiah, your Jesus,
on the night that he was betrayed,
tell you that he was sharing this life of his
– this life filled with God's own life,
this life that God will not let be defeated –
didn't he say that he was sharing *all that* with you?'

And as he says this,
he tears into three the loaf that Cleopas has handed to him,
and he says, 'Blessed are you, Lord God,
for bringing the wheat for this bread from the earth,
and life from the grave.'

And then he hands it to you, saying, 'Take, eat...'
... and you will never be able to describe what happens next,
except to say that he was, quite suddenly, not there,
and that, without being able to tell
how you could have missed it before,
how you could have walked with him and sat with him
without ever knowing,
you realised who it was who had been with you,

who had blessed the bread, and broken it,
and shared it with you.

And how you knew in that moment
that *everything* had changed.

Amen.