

St Brandon's, Sermon for 14th April 2024.

Acts 3:12-19, Luke 24:36b-48

"A flesh and bones God"

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If you attempted to use Lent for the prescribed purpose of study, fasting and giving alms, you might well feel that Easter is the moment of reprieve: 'Well done, faithful servant, take a rest until next year'. Well, today's readings suggest otherwise: they suggest the learning is just beginning. That is, if we model ourselves on the disciples, because we see them today in a pattern of three steps: learning, believing, and following.

Learning, step one:

Have you noticed how different the accounts are in the different gospels of the risen Lord appearing to his disciples? None of the four describe quite the same scene or responses.

In Matthew, the risen Lord meets the two Mary's at the tomb and tells them to tell the eleven to go to Galilee to meet him, which they do; the focus is on what he says to them, the great commission which they receive: 'go and make disciples'. Mark, in its early forms, finishes with the woman being instructed by an angel to remind the eleven to go to Galilee to see him, but as Anna said on Easter day, they are too afraid, say nothing, and there it stops, unfinished. John describes four appearances over an extended period, in great detail.

Luke's tells of two resurrection appearances, both on Easter day. The first is on the road to Emmaus, and the second is the one we have just heard. Cleopas and his companion have just arrived breathless from hurrying back from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell the eleven how they met a stranger on the road who opened the scriptures to them, and then revealed himself to be the actual risen Jesus as he broke bread at supper. They hadn't finished sharing their story before the Lord again appears, thoroughly alarming and exciting the gathered eleven.

Luke's emphasis is on the flesh and bones nature of the risen Lord. "*Touch me,*" he urges, "*a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones as you see that I have.*"

Terror and uncertainty – doubt, give way to wonder and disbelief. Their responses change from something like, 'What the hell is this trick of an apparition?' To, 'How on earth can this be true? How on earth can this be possible?' Joy, yes, but also disbelief and wonder. They have seen now the wounds from the nails in the hands and feet, and in his side. Did they explore those wounds with their fingers? Feel his arms and legs, the solid warmth of flesh and the shape of bones underneath, all so familiar and normal? Yet, he had been killed, he had been very properly dead and buried – the women had seen the body in the tomb and how it was laid the evening he was crucified.

Jesus ramps up the evidence to another level: "*Have you anything here to eat?*" And he eats, quite normally.

Luke pays a lot of attention to this, he describes it fully, where he doesn't give space to recording what Jesus says to open their minds to the scriptures.

Why is it so important to Luke? As a doctor, he would have been as confounded as any of them, yet he insists that it is a physical reality.

How is it possible for someone as solid and fleshy firm as he is to simply appear in a locked room; to have disappeared from the Emmaus supper table the moment they recognised him? Who, what, can be flesh and bone and yet pass through walls; de-materialise?

This was not a bringing back to life in the way Lazarus was miraculously called out of the tomb by Jesus: Lazarus was dead, then alive again, then died at some point. Jesus is not the re-animated body that we picture with Frankenstein.

This is a new body created out a new type of flesh and bone. It is the definition of the new creation that becomes articulated in the Book of

Revelation, and Paul expounds in his first letter to the Corinthians. It is an entirely new creation with new substance, and substance that belongs both in the heavenly domain and the earthly domain. Jesus is the single and only example of the new creation that we have been shown. The significance of him being born, living and dying as a human in a historical time and place is to assure us that there is a route open to us all at the last day to be transformed, created new, in the same fashion.

Believing, step two

The challenge this gospel text is posing, a challenge that has been much debated, is that it is telling us that you cannot believe in the resurrection without believing that it involved – both for Jesus and believers after him – full bodily existence.

The disciples believe. They see and feel the risen Jesus, and the familiar sight of him calmly munching on baked fish, and they believe what they see, they know it is true, even though they do not understand what they see. They are prepared to believe he is fully bodily resurrected, and know it, despite not understanding it.

According to Luke, (the author of Acts as well as the gospel), the disciples spend the next forty days discussing and inwardly digesting all they have seen and learnt. They have to bring together the traumatic arrest and execution, Scriptural prophecies concerning the Messiah, what Jesus had said in his historical life about his fate, and what they experience and learn from him as risen Lord.

The pieces of the puzzle begin to make sense, to take root deeply in the disciples preparing them for worship at the point of Christ's ascension, and thus for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentacost. It brings them to a true understanding of the assurance of salvation, and a deep knowledge and commitment to Christ that is unshakeable.

Following, step three

We see the effects of this transforming knowledge in the narrative of their Acts, the authority with which Peter is able to call on the name of Jesus to heal, to expound the gospel message, calling people to repentance and forgiveness. Peter is now fearless in his leadership and following of Christ, along with the other disciples and the growing crowds of believers. They have already become what we must be: a church rooted in scripture and active in mission.

These forty days before Ascension are a time for us to practise the kind of learning that leads to greater believing and following. Practising looking with the eyes of faith at all we have learnt in order to deepen belief: that intuitive knowing that comes before the intellect has started to put it through the scope of reason. Augustine coined it, 'I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand.'

Read these passages again later in the week, try the technique we call 'dwelling in the Word' to see what stands out and speaks to you. Try picturing the scene in your imagination, how would it be if the risen Lord asked *you* to reach out and touch him? Pray about what you see and feel; be open and expectant but don't be disillusioned if you sense nothing initially, persist. Keep pondering the mystery of the resurrection, how it fits with the incarnation and the eucharist.

Believing does lead to following, and deeper belief to deeper following. That is why we prayed today for knowledge of his risen presence to strengthen us as we serve him.

Amen