

Brancepeth sermon
19 April 2026

Acts 2.14a, 36-41

Luke 24.13-35

Psalm 116: 1-3, 10-17

May I speak in the name of God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen.

On these Sundays after Easter,

we hear a lot of stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances.

And one of the curious features of those stories

is the way that, so often, Jesus' followers don't recognise him.

And I find that hard to imagine.

How could they see this Jesus whom they knew so well,

and *not* have any clue who it was?

And today's story is the strangest of the lot.

I mean: maybe Mary Magdalene didn't recognise

the man she took to be the gardener

because it was still dark;

maybe, later on, the disciples didn't recognise

Jesus on the shore of Galilee

because they were too far away, out on the lake,

and, again, it was just after daybreak.

But today's story, with Cleopas and his unnamed companion,

walking the road to Emmaus –

well, Jesus is right there with them, in the broad light of day,

so how could they *not* know who he was?

Why is it that, in the words we heard read,

‘their eyes were kept from recognizing him’?

Well, to be honest, my answer is, ‘I don't know’

...

but that would make for a rather abrupt end to the sermon,

so let me try to provide one element of an answer.

What I want to suggest to you is that
it had something to do with the fact that
they had not been *listening*.

First of all, they had not been listening to *Jesus*.

Jesus had been telling them for some time
that he was going to go to Jerusalem,
he was going to die,
and he was going to be raised on the third day.

And I suspect that, when Jesus first said all this,
it just didn't register with the disciples; it didn't compute;
they put it down as just one more mysterious parable
from Jesus' lips,
and barely even filed it away in their memories.

So when Jesus *did* go to Jerusalem, and *was* killed,
the disciples were not measuring that against
the storyline Jesus had given them,
and they were certainly not thinking about
what he had told them would happen *next*:

they weren't expecting the empty tomb;
they weren't expecting to meet Jesus again,
because his words had just not *taken root* in their minds.

And I think that, in part, that was because those words
were crowded out by their expectations for him.

They expected him to be a ruler.

They expected him to take charge.

They expected him to win a victory –

a visible, miraculous victory over the Romans,

over the Romans' Judean collaborators,

over the rich and the powerful.

Cleopas and his companion, on the road to Emmaus,

say that the Jesus they had been following

was 'mighty in deed and word',

and that they 'had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel'

– and that word 'redeem' here

doesn't mean anything spiritual or otherworldly,

it refers to getting someone out of slavery:

they expected Jesus to end the subjugation of Israel,
to bring about regime change.

The idea that Jesus would be handed over to the occupying powers,
that he would be condemned to death,
that he would be buried –
none of that fitted in the picture they had of him,
so Jesus' words, telling them how the story was actually going to go,
simply wouldn't stick.

So I think, perhaps, that on the road to Emmaus,
their eyes were kept from recognising him,
God *prevented* them from recognising him,
because their expectations *still* needed to be transformed.
They needed something to happen
that would not *let* them think, 'Oh, okay,
Jesus has been miraculously restored to us,
and so we can now get on with the story we were expecting.'

They needed to be *shown*, in a visceral way,
that they had not yet truly grasped who this Jesus was,

they needed to *hear*, in a way that would really take root in them,
that they had not yet truly listened to him.

So, yes, I think they were not allowed to recognise him
because they had not been listening to him.

But there's another way, too, in which they had not been listening.
Cleopas and his companion, talking to the stranger on the road,
tell him what they had heard, earlier that day, from
some of the women amongst the disciples –
the women who had been to the tomb before dawn,
who had seen a vision of angels,
who had been told that Jesus was alive,
and who passed that message on to the rest of the disciples.

But we are told that the rest of the disciples
thought this 'an idle tale', and didn't believe them.

And I think we can see that Cleopas and his companion
were amongst those disciples who had *not believed these women*.

They are, after all, heading away from Jerusalem;
they're leaving; they have given up; they're going home.

These are not people expecting Jesus to appear to them again.

These are not people who believe that he is alive.

They have heard the women's testimony,

but they have walked away from it.

And I suspect that this, too, has to do with their expectations.

They expected a Jesus who would do mighty things,

a Jesus who would display strength,

a Jesus who would win a victory that they could recognise.

And if they did not expect a Jesus who was going to be arrested and killed,

they also did not expect a Jesus who was going

to choose *women*, ordinary *women*

to be the bearers of the news of his resurrection,

to be his witnesses, his messengers –

not in a world where the words of women were not taken seriously,

not in a world where women did not really have a voice,

not in a world where women were not believed.

But look again at how Jesus responds.

‘Oh, how foolish you are,’ he said,

‘and how slow of heart to believe

all that the prophets have declared!’

And my suggestion this morning is that

those words have a double meaning.

The most obvious meaning is, yes, that

Jesus is telling them that they have not understood

what the *scriptures* say about him –

he is, after all, about to take them through those scriptures,

to show them all that they have missed.

But I think there’s a second meaning here, too.

When Jesus says,

‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe

all that the prophets have declared!’

I think we can *also* hear him as saying,

‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to recognise

that the women who came to you this morning –

they were my prophets!

How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to understand
that they were *exactly* the witnesses I have chosen,
these were *exactly* the ones I wanted bearing my message,
and proclaiming my resurrection to you.

And how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to realise
that this was no accident;
it was not just because they happened to reach the tomb first.

It's because my message, my word,
the truth of my kingdom,
belongs on the lips of those you think of as weak;
it *belongs* on the lips of those you are inclined to dismiss;
it *belongs* on the lips of those you habitually ignore.

If you can't grasp that,
you haven't yet grasped the nature of my kingdom at all.
'how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe
all that my chosen prophets have declared!'

Now, it would be nice to be able to finish this sermon
by saying that, even if Cleopas and his companion
had not yet listened properly to what Jesus
and the women who tended his tomb had to say to them,
at least they did *eventually* get the message,
and at least the church today has got that message.

It would be nice to be able to say that
we have listened,
that *we* understand the kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim.

But we don't have to look very hard
to find evidence that perhaps we have not yet understood.

And I don't just mean the way we see
people claiming that Jesus is on the side of
their bombs, their military strength,
and their aggressive, hyper-masculine strutting.

I doubt many of us here are tempted to cheer along with any of that.

And I don't just mean the ways in which
women are still treated as second-class members of our church,
something you can see, for instance, in the sheer vitriol

which has been poured out about the appointment of a woman
as Archbishop of Canterbury.

I doubt many of us here
are tempted to cheer along with any of that, either.

I mean, rather, the other, more subtle ways in which we're tempted
to think that Jesus chooses as his messengers
the respectable, those who already have a position and a voice.

I mean the ways in which we are still tempted to think
in hierarchical ways,
as if the true message of Jesus
normally spreads from the top down –
from bishops to clergy to laity, say,
or from a professor of theology standing at a lectern,
out to the people seated in the chairs beneath him.

Jesus said, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe
all that *my* prophets have declared!'
how slow you are to recognise the people whom
I choose as my primary messengers.

And with those words ringing in my ears,
I want to leave you with a question
a somewhat ironic question, given where I am standing:

What if it's not primarily in carefully crafted sermons
from professorial lips,
not primarily from the hierarchy of the church,
not primarily from those who have a position and a voice
that we hear the true message of Jesus' resurrection,
the message of the new life that Jesus proclaimed and embodied;

what if it is more in the lives and words of people
like those women whom Cleopas and his companion disbelieved –
people who may have little status or privilege or visibility,
but who carry on being faithful followers of Jesus,
who get on with the business of ordinary caring,
people who don't have a lectern to stand behind,
but who can be trusted to turn up, to get on with things,
to bring the spices to the tomb, to remember what needs to be done,
people who may not think of themselves as having a voice,
but who know Jesus as their companion and their friend?

What if the resurrection life of Jesus
is not primarily something that *any* sermon can tell you about
not primarily something to be *explained*,
or set out with some kind of apparent authority,
but is something that is best *shown* to us
in the lives of the kind of people Jesus chose as his first witnesses?
What if *that's* the listening we need to do,
to make sure we recognise Jesus when he appears?

Amen.