Sermon for Easter 3 on 18th April 2021

By Revd Graham Earney

Acts 3.12-19; Luke 24.36b-48

I am indebted to Graham (Phillips) for reading my words this morning. As some of you know, I had hoped to be with you in person to present my sermon. However, due to my recent ‘excursion’ into RSH and a subsequent mix-up over appointments, I will have to ‘shield’ for a little longer.

My starting point today is where we left off last week. It is completely appropriate as we continue to understand the feelings and happenings of the disciples following the resurrection of Jesus. The keen-eyed among you will have already noted that this week Luke goes over very similar ground to that in John’s gospel last week.

At the end of last Sunday’s Zoom service someone commented that they had read the sermon on paper, but that it was a completely new experience to hear it preached. There is real power in hearing something ‘first hand’, rather than ‘second hand’ as the printed word. My mind went back in time to the seventies when the Times ran an annual “Sermon of the Year” competition. A number of my friends thought of entering until they saw that the first three rounds of the competition were to be judged remotely on the written script. Their point of objection was that the sermon is a spoken medium which prompts an interaction between the speaker and the audience. Our experiences of hearing the word are as important as the thoughts of the one who produces the word.

I transpose that into a slightly different context. Have you ever been in a room with your back to the doorway while you talk to a circle of friends? Inevitably the conversation moves to include talk of someone who isn’t in the group. You’re talking when you realise that the body language of those facing you has subtly changed. Instinctively you feel the person being spoken of is in the doorway directly behind you – and you have to cover your confusion. It happened to me. The time I remember is when it was the bishop who was employing me at the time!

If you think the post resurrection experiences the disciples had were subtle like that – think again! There appear from the gospel accounts to have been nothing subtle about them.

I want you to have a good look round church and note the detail of what you can see.

Now close your eyes, tight, so you can see only blackness.

Now open your eyes and imagine Jesus stood on the cancel step looking straight at you and saying, “Peace be with you”.

He may be saying peace be with you, but peace is probably the last thing on their minds. Will my heart stop racing? Is closer to how they feel. We can sense the confusion and the fear pulsing out of them. One second he is nowhere to be seen – the next there he is in the midst of them. Talking to them. Calming their fear. Showing them that it is really him – not a ghost – not some form of sprite – but the real Jesus as they had known him. More than that, the real Christ in glory as they would know him through the Holy Spirit.

That was the experience of the disciples. It is not our experience as we enter church or into an act of worship. We live in the post-resurrection period. We see the risen Christ alive in our lives and we look forward to seeing him even more fully in the future. Does it feel like he walks into church with us Sunday by Sunday? In a sense we bring Christ in with us, only to find that he has gone before and is already here.

The opposite is also true. At the end of the service Christ returns with us to our homes, our families, our circles of friends, our communities. Only for us to find that he has gone before us, he is already there. We need to build up our experience of him – not as he was in the time of the disciples but as he is now, in the present, as we live our lives in the light of Christ.

We gain a sense of this in our two readings today. We have the benefit of two readings from the same author. Luke writes his gospel as if it were a contemporary account. He wasn’t present in the upper room, but he tells the story told to him by the disciples as if he had been. Note his account varies from that of John in that all eleven remaining disciples were there at the same point – Luke has no story of the doubting Thomas only finding out the truth of the resurrection on a subsequent occasion. Luke is also the author of the account of Peter’s preaching after Pentecost as recorded in Acts.

Peter reminds his hearers that Jesus came from a line of faithfulness which stretched back to the Patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He accuses the people of rejecting the “Holy and Righteous One”.

 “You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead” – announcing that he and the disciples are witnesses to the resurrection. It is faith in Jesus which has made the lame man whole. In the light of that he states that he thought they had acted in ignorance and he encourages them to repent and turn to God. The power of the risen Christ is already at work in him, emboldening him to challenge the people’s view of their ancient faith and turn to worshipping God through the power of the risen Jesus Christ.

Peter’s preaching was in the light of the resurrection after the coming of the Holy Spirit. We too live in that post resurrection light. Our task is both simple and profound – to be part of the light of Christ shining in our generation. Shining in the way we love one another and cherish our relationships. Shining in the way we seek to care for and enhance God’s creation throughout nature. Shining as we worship God and bless his holy name, not just in services but also in faithful service throughout life. May the Holy Spirit give us strength to sustain our efforts in all these things.

Revd Graham Earney