

## Sermon Easter 2 Year B 2024

In the afterglow of our Easter celebrations, it may be tempting to take our foot off the pedal, so to speak. For those of us who shared in our Holy Week and Easter observances know what an intense and even demanding experience it is. For sure, it is difficult to maintain that level of intensity. But the church reminds us, however: *Easter ain't over!* The paschal Candle, lit on Holy Saturday night to symbolize the light of the Risen Christ, takes pride of place here at the front of the church. The songs of Alleluia continue to ring, having been suppressed for the six weeks of Lent. We wear festive vestments, and all the rest, now for 50 days. All this to remind us that the central mystery of our faith – the resurrection of Jesus – cannot easily be apprehended. We take our time now over the coming weeks to consider some of its repercussions.

Rightly, then, does the gospel writer Matthew describe an earthquake occurring *after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning*. The Resurrection has earth shattering consequences. Tremors go out from it. Importantly, though, *all* the gospel writers in diverse and compelling ways, seek to make the point that the earthquake of the resurrection, the tremors that go out from it, shake us still. All the gospels not only want to tell us that *this happened*. They also want to tell us how the Resurrection impacts people. How lives are changed. The gospel accounts indeed stress that the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead and that he was seen and encountered by his disciples. But they also point to how this impacts all believers everywhere. All the gospels seek to make *a link* between what happened on Easter day and us.

In the striking gospel account placed before us today this idea is put to us in two key ways. The first is that the power and presence of Jesus continues to be experienced and known in his church. In the gospel account today, we really have two stories. The first has Jesus appearing to the disciples, *In the evening of that same day the first day of the week* (that is, Easter Day), *the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were for fear of the Jews*. Even in that single verse we might read a whole range of emotions. The trauma of Good Friday was still fresh in their minds. The news that Peter and beloved disciple had seen the tomb empty. The even more startling news that Mary Magdalene had seen the risen Lord. Fear, confusion, uncertainty, and (perhaps even hope) converge in this moment as the story opens.

And into this Jesus appears. Despite the doors being locked, Jesus comes and stands *'in their midst'*. In this passage, Jesus is both clearly corporeal (bodily) but in a transformed way. He is unconstrained by the limits of the physical world, but can come and go as he pleases. It ought to remind us that the resurrection of Jesus is not merely the resuscitation of a corpse. In the terms of the gospels themselves, the Resurrection is of an entirely new, different and unprecedented category. In short, the resurrected Jesus is continuous with his earthly body, but changed.

And Jesus appearing in this way – continuous but changed – signals something for the disciples gathered in the locked room. They are transformed by this encounter. Yes, continuous with what went before, but changed into something entirely new. Because this appearance describes nothing less than the beginning of the church. All the ingredients are there: a company of disciples; the presence of the crucified, now risen, Christ; the sending of the church into the world; the giving of the Holy Spirit; the message of the forgiveness of sins. This is precisely how the church has understood its mission and identity for the last 2000 years! What's more Jesus shows them his hands and his side, and *they rejoiced when they saw the Lord*. It is witnessing the wounds of Christ that inspires their joy! Joy comes to the disciples as they begin to recognise who Jesus really is, and what his death and resurrection really mean.

Part of what Jesus' death and resurrection means is that the life of this transformed community – the church - will find meaning in the transformed wounds of Christ. On Good Friday we heard how from the side of Christ opened by the spear as Jesus hung dead on the Cross, flowed blood and water. This wound points to both baptism and Eucharist, the very life of the church. But it is a wound transformed and given true power through the Resurrection. It is precisely through the transformed wounds of Christ that Jesus can speak the word of peace. Our peace comes through his wounds.

The appearance of Jesus on Easter Day, the imparting of the Spirit, and the commissioning to share in Christ's own ministry only go to stress the point: *the close continuity between Jesus and his church*. Just as Jesus is sent by the Father with a mission, so the church is sent by Jesus with a mission. Just as Jesus has been bearer of the Spirit, so the church is the bearer of the Spirit. Just as Jesus has declared the forgiveness of sins, so the church declares the forgiveness of sins. In short, the church - the community that bears the name of Christ – *finds its model and mandate in Jesus himself*.

It is in this that the gospel writer wants us to see how the message and power of the Resurrection stretches through the centuries to us. The evangelist is effectively saying, *ladies and gentlemen, this relates to you too! And this is how...* What we seek to do in our shared life, in our mission and ministry - all of it - is rooted in and continues the ministry of Jesus. And it is perhaps this that marks the church out in the clearest way from all other social groupings. Now, some things in the church's life *are* shared with other social groups, such as negotiating the tension between attracting new members, keeping old ones, motivating people to participate. But the church is not primarily just a social group, much less a club or social justice organisation! What makes the church different - what sets us apart - is precisely what the gospel text outlines for us today: *the church has a divine origin*. We find our model and mandate in Jesus. And we will discover our reason for being not in our apparent success or failures, in our growth or influence (however seductive and easy those measures may be). Our reason for being is *only* in our faithfulness to the call and commission of Jesus.

So, Jesus and the power of his Resurrection is continued in the life and witness of the church. The second way the power of Jesus resurrection is experienced is through faith. This aspect is put to us in the classic scene for this day: Jesus' encounter with Thomas. And this second encounter seems to exactly mirror the first: the doors are locked; Jesus stands in their midst; he greets them a third time 'Peace be with you!' Then his attention is turned to Thomas. The risen Jesus completely accepts Thomas' demands of proof, so that his invitation repeats exactly the language of finger and nails and hand and side that Thomas himself used. Now, there is no suggestion that Thomas takes Jesus up on the offer; seeing Jesus for himself is enough. Thomas is immediately forgiven, and he is once more incorporated into the community of disciples.

This then leads to the concluding statement by Jesus himself and which draws both stories together. Addressed to Thomas but of course really spoken to us: *Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*. Those 'who have not seen' (you and I!) are not in any sense inferior to those who 'have seen and believed'; it is *the shared reality of belief* that matters. Where Thomas had the visual evidence of the Living Word before him, we now have the evidence of the written word, and both are equally sufficient evidence for placing our trust in Jesus. And it is the unbroken witness of the living Church that continues to make that belief tangible. Amen.