

Sunday 12th April 2015

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **314** **“This joyful Eastertide”**
 311 **“The day of resurrection”**
 297 **“Christ is alive! Let Christians sing”**
 312 **“The head that once was crowned with thorns”**
 305 **“Low in the grave he lay”**

READINGS: **1 John 1:1- 2:2**
 John 20:19-31

“WITNESSES”

Last Sunday – on the third day after Good Friday – we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus. The Church was full upstairs and down. Members of church families, who don’t often come to church, came. Visitors in London – from other parts of Britain and from around the world – they came, too, and worshipped with us.

Whereas people had worn sombre clothes on the Friday – white was the colour for Easter Sunday. Women wore hats – they were in celebration mode. The music on Friday had been appropriate to a time of sorrow, but on Sunday we sang our hearts out with joy. When Leslie said, ‘Alleluia! Christ is risen,’ we all responded, ‘He is risen, indeed!’

The music, the acclamation, the celebration bound everyone present in worship – the regulars and the occasionals – into one community – a community recognising and giving thanks for the core element of the Christian faith – Jesus’ rising from the dead.

All over the country, all over the world that scene which we experienced here at Wesley’s Chapel was repeated.

What a contrast! What a contrast to that first Easter Sunday. “When it was evening of that day, the first day of the week” – that is how our reading from John’s Gospel began. That day was a day like no other for the disciples. After the awful reality of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial on Friday – this third day, this Sunday brought some very strange and unsettling events.

Early that day Mary Magdalene had come, in great distress, to tell the disciples that Jesus’ body was missing from the tomb. Hearing that, Peter had rushed to the tomb to confirm that what Mary had said, was indeed, true. And there it was – the linen cloths neatly folded but no corpse.

Then a little later Mary Magdalene came to the disciples again – breathless with bewilderment and excitement – and told them, ‘I have seen the Lord.’

“And when the evening of that day came the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews. On the day which we now celebrate so joyously, the disciples were far from celebrating. They were fearful, they were

huddled together behind locked doors. They were fearful ... fearful of the Jews. Yes, they themselves were Jews, so they were not fearful of Jews in general. The Jews that they were afraid of were the leaders of The Jerusalem and Temple Jews – Caiaphas, the High Priest and the seniors of the Sanhedrin Court who had been responsible for the plot against Jesus and who had whipped up the crowd to call out, 'crucify him!'

The disciples were afraid that these same people might be wanting to get rid of them, too. The disciples were afraid for their own lives, afraid of their uncertain future. They had clearly decided to lie low until such time as the events of the previous days had faded from peoples' memories.

But, perhaps, that was not the disciples only fear. In the last week of Jesus' life most of them had not covered themselves with glory. They had not been the good friends to Jesus that he could have expected them to be. When Jesus had been at his lowest ebb in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying to his Father as earnestly as he could – his disciples could not even stay awake. They had fallen asleep, not once but twice even after Jesus had appealed to them to support him in prayer. Jesus had every right to be pretty fed-up with his disciples – indeed deeply disappointed with them.

And then there was Peter. Peter the disciple who had assured Jesus that he would never, ever leave him and yet when challenged by others, denied Jesus, not just once, not just twice but three times. Peter had a lot to come to terms with about himself – perhaps that is why he ran off to confirm the message of Mary Magdalene that Jesus was not in the tomb. Peter had a lot to think about and a lot to be fearful about.

And when Jesus had hung on the cross – where were his disciples then? There was only John with Jesus 'mother the rest were nowhere to be seen. They had deserted their master.

So, on that evening of the first day of the week, the last person the disciples wanted to meet was Jesus, risen from the dead, and, in their minds, possibly coming to confront them with their failures.

What a contrast between the joyous worship of our Easter Day and the fear and foreboding of the disciples on that first Easter day.

And the wider group of disciples, where were they? We know that the inner group of women had remained faithful and visited the tomb but the rest? They had scattered. The community which had gathered around the teacher, Jesus, in life in death lost their confidence, were fearful and had scattered. Some went back to their jobs – Jesus later found them fishing on Lake Galilee.

But Jesus could not and cannot be stopped by locked doors or fearful minds. Jesus, who had called himself the door of the sheepfold, came right through the locked doors of the house where the disciples were holed up. He did it not once but twice - once when Thomas was absent and again, a week later when Thomas was present.

Jesus came right through those locked doors not to confront his disciples with their failures but to grant them 'peace' – 'shalom' - a blessing that connotes a deep and holistic sense of well-being that knows nothing of fear. Jesus says to his quaking disciples, 'peace be with you – do not be afraid.' Then Jesus did a strange thing – he showed his disciples the wounds so that they can see that he is real – not a ghost or an apparition. He shows them that he was dead and is now risen to a new quality of life, yet still bearing the scars of his crucifixion. The disciples rejoiced – gradually they recognised that this was the risen Jesus, risen just as he had told them he would be.

Thomas – a week later brought his doubt to what his fellow disciples had reported about Jesus. Thomas was not afraid to ask questions, to be sceptical of what had gone on. Jesus reaches out to him – both literally and metaphorically. In that moment Thomas encountered not an idea or a report but the living Jesus and in that moment he believed.

Then later on the Emmaus road and by the lakeshore Jesus reveals himself to more of his confused followers – gently, peacefully, bringing all those who had been his followers into a new community.

Jesus is eager to break through the fear, incredulity and astonishment of his followers and to be known by them. On that Easter evening, behind the locked doors Jesus begins the birth of the church – the 'ecclesia' – the assembly gathered together, open to all who believe.

But Jesus' resurrection did not just create a community of witnesses, it created a community with a task, with a commission – "as the Father has sent me, so I send you." The disciples are to continue Jesus' mission of revealing God to the world. And Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would be with them forever to guide and empower them.

Through the resurrection a new community was born – a community of those who will witness to Jesus and to God's mission to all people. It was a community bound together by their shared experiences and by the power of the Spirit.

We have seen recently how traumatic events can create 'community' and solidarity where none has existed before. After the killings at the office of the satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, in Paris there was a surge of identification with those who had been killed and their mission. Crowds gathered on the streets of Paris carrying placards saying, 'Je suis Charlie' – 'I am Charlie' to show their solidarity. There was a cause to struggle for – there was a solidarity to be built. Perhaps the first anniversary will be commemorated but that community is already scattered, that solidarity already fractured. There is no continuing witnessing community.

But the community which gathered around the risen and resurrected Jesus is still a witnessing community now ... because all those who gather around the story of Jesus are called to be witnesses to what happened in 1st century Palestine. So that great crowd who were assembled here last week and you today are being called to be witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection – to witness to those who resist or refuse to receive the revelation of God in the person of Jesus.

We are here this morning because of the continuous stream of witnessing since that first Easter day – how can we fail to take our responsibility for passing on the good news of Jesus?

Yet we know only too well that we have much in common with the disciples in their fear and doubt. Are we so different from them even after we have heard, just a week ago, that Jesus had risen from the grave?

There are anxieties and fears in our own lives which betray our own disbelief. There are fears which keep us locked in as individuals and as congregations – locked in and so kept from fulfilling the mission for which Jesus called us.

The promise of our reading today is that Jesus cannot be stopped by our locked doors. Jesus comes to us in the midst of doubt, fear, pain and confusion. He breathes the Holy Spirit upon us – creating and recreating communities of witnesses.

And Jesus keeps on showing up ... just like he did for Thomas. Jesus keeps on showing up wherever his people are gathered. He shows up in word and water, in bread and wine – not wanting anyone to miss out on the life and peace he offers.

And he keeps on showing up to nudge and cajole us out of our safe, locked rooms and our safe predictable closed door churches and into a world that, just like us, needs his gifts of life and peace.

May God change us from fearful to fearless witnesses for his gospel today.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed, Alleluia! Amen