

3rd April 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

Hymns: 297 “Christ is alive! Let Christians sing”
 305 “Low in the grave he lay”
 306 “Now the green blade rises from the buried grain”
 303 “I know that my Redeemer lives”
 312 “The head that once was crowned with thorns”

Readings: Acts 5:27-41
 John 20:19-31

“BELIEVING”

**Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

What a hectic time we have passed through! The sombre service of Good Friday – the challenging words of Jesus from the Cross, the silence, the poetry which sought to fathom the depths of what happened, music speaking to us of emotions too deep for words and silence in which to contemplate our own lives and our own pilgrimage of faith.

Then Easter Sunday, a day of joyous greeting with the words of resurrection – ‘Christ is risen!’ – ‘He is risen, indeed, Alleluia!’ A day for rousing hymns, ‘Jesus Christ is risen today’ and the wonderful, ‘Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son’ with which to go and face the world. Last Sunday was indeed a day of overflowing celebration.

Now, here we are in calmer waters on the Sunday which used to be called ‘Low Sunday’ and which, perhaps, we could even call ‘anti-climax Sunday’ when fewer people are expected to turn out to church and ministers, exhausted by Holy Week and Easter services, take time off (except at Wesley’s Chapel!).

But I would rather think of today as a time for deeper reflection on all that happened over Good Friday and, especially, Easter Sunday.

Yesterday, as I came back from Upper Street in Islington, the bus was stopped for a while outside the offices of the National Autistic Society. Painted along their wall in big, bright letters is the following “Too much information”. It is part of a campaign to help change the public understanding of autism and of how people who are diagnosed along the autistic spectrum experience life. Such people struggle when they feel that there is just too much information coming at them for them to take it all in.

Well, to be honest, that is how I often feel about Good Friday and Easter ‘too much information’ in the different Gospels, too many emotions, such a lot to digest and to see what it has to say for our own lives. So today we are going to have a time of reflection and of digestion, of looking at the Easter story, seeing what it meant for those caught up in it and seeing what it means for us.

Let us set the context for those first disciples – the context of our reading from John's Gospel. After the events of Good Friday the disciples were afraid. It was the women who went to the tomb and found Jesus' body missing; it was they who reported back to the disciples, it was they who prompted Peter to rush to the tomb to confirm the reports for himself. The disciples themselves were scarce, hardly venturing out at all.

So the opening words of our reading are, 'and when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews'. On the day we now celebrate so joyously as Easter Sunday – Resurrection Day – the disciples were far from celebrating. They were fearful, huddled together behind locked doors. They were fearful not of Jews in general, they themselves were Jews after all, but of the religious authorities who had been behind the plot against Jesus. The disciples were afraid that these same people might want to get rid of them, too. So they decided to lie low and shut themselves away until everything calmed down. They were afraid of the uncertain future that awaited them.

But, perhaps, that was not their only fear. In the last week of Jesus' life most of the disciples had not covered themselves with glory. They had not been the good friends to Jesus that he might have expected them to be. For people who had been with him for three years they were insensitive, unthinking and more concerned about themselves than about their master. If, as they had often expressed, they believed in Jesus as the Messiah, then they had a strange way of showing it. When Jesus was at his lowest ebb in the Garden of Gethsemane, where were all the disciples? Asleep! On that evening they had fallen asleep not once but twice after Jesus had appealed to them to support him in prayer.

Jesus had every right to feel pretty fed-up with his disciples, indeed deeply disappointed in them.

And then there was Peter – the most devout, the most enthusiastic of the disciples in pledging his loyalty to Jesus yet when challenged by others he denied all knowledge of Jesus – not once but three times. Peter had a lot to think about, a lot to come to terms with about himself – no wonder he was fearful.

The disciples must also have thought about Jesus on the Cross and the fact that, with the exception of John it seems the others were out of sight. Had they deserted their Master at this critical hour?

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

Jesus could not 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. Jesus came right through those locked doors not to confront his disciples 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.' Then Jesus did a strange thing – he showed his disciples his wounds so that they could see that he was real and not an apparition and that he was still bearing the wounds of crucifixion. We read 'the disciples rejoiced' – they recognised that this was really Jesus, risen just as he had told them he would be. Yet interestingly Jesus did not spend much time that first Easter Day, at least not from the evidence we have in the Gospels, in making a case for belief in his having risen from the dead. Even before the disciples are done with their rejoicing, we are made aware that Jesus is not so much preoccupied with eternal life, as his rising from the dead implies, but with life here and now. Without any delay Jesus is breathing the power of the Holy Spirit on the disciples – giving them the power of forgiveness and inviting them to be the people who extend the same peace which he had spoken to them, when he entered into their fear behind locked doors, to other people.

A week later the whole scene was re-enacted but this time with Thomas present. He had heard what his fellow disciples had reported to him well enough and he was very doubtful – he wanted more than words to convince him that the crucified Jesus was alive again. He wanted to see the nail marks, to be sure that this was the same Jesus who had been nailed to the cross.

So, when Jesus enters the house a second time he reaches out to Thomas – both literally and metaphorically. In that moment Thomas encountered not an idea or the report of others but the living Jesus and in that moment he believed. This encounter of Jesus with Thomas emphasises that believing is much more than an attitude of mind. For Thomas it was his encounter, a personal encounter, with Jesus, that made all the difference between doubt and belief, between fear and belief. Thomas received the gift of belief through his encounter with Jesus and his heartfelt response was, 'my Lord and my God.'

Believing, in this case, believing that Jesus had been raised from the dead was for Thomas and for the other disciples far more than an intellectual conviction. It was an encounter with the God whose power had brought Jesus back from death to life. The gift of that belief and that faith was now to be lived out and would be tested.

Jesus' resurrection did much more than 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.' No time for theologising – down to practical business immediately.

Believing in Jesus as the Son of God, as the crucified one raised from the dead, is far more than just accepting an idea or having an intellectual conviction – it is a gift which calls forth a response. Jesus' community of disciples were called to continue his peace-bringing, life-enhancing mission of revealing God to the world.

Through the resurrection a new community was born – a community bound together by belief, shared experience and the power of the Spirit. And the community which still gathers around the risen Lord is a witnessing community today. We, here this morning, are here because of a continuous stream of witnessing ever since that first Easter Day. If we, like Thomas, have encountered the risen Jesus - we, too, are called to respond – yes, as Thomas did with the exclamation, 'my Lord and my God' but also by taking up our responsibility for passing on the Good News to others.

Yet we know only too well that we have much in common with those first 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