

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 26th April 2020
3rd Sunday of Easter

Collect

Risen Christ,
you filled your disciples with boldness and fresh hope:
strengthen us to proclaim your risen life
and fill us with your peace,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them:

‘Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.’

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Sermon

For my fortieth birthday, I decided to visit Australia and New Zealand, where I have extended family. After spending a week in Sydney and several days in Melbourne, I was booked on a flight from Melbourne to Auckland. It was an early flight, landing just after lunch, which gave me plenty of time for the drive down from Auckland to Taupo. Well, that was until the plane spent 4 hours sitting on the tarmac in Melbourne, waiting to decide whether a storm was sufficiently distant to guarantee we could avoid it.

Fortunately the wonders of modern technology meant that I could get an email to my family in Taupo so that they knew I would be arriving late. I also asked them to contact the car hire company – which was due to be closed before my delayed arrival. Once we touched down, to add insult to injury, we were behind a flight which was being heavily scrutinised by biosecurity. By the time I was sat behind the wheel of the car, darkness was falling, and I had a journey of nearly 300 km ahead of me with neither satnav nor a road map.

And so began my journey from Auckland to Taupo. Well, I say it began, but although I knew I needed State Highway 1 going South, somehow I couldn't seem to find it. In desperation, I stopped at some shops and asked some people coming out of a takeaway pizza place whether they could direct me. They started to explain, and then said, "actually, just follow us, and we'll show you". Which is exactly what I did, and as they pulled off into their residential street, they waved me onto the right road.

The next four hours were probably some of the longest of my life, wondering whether I was heading in the right direction, whether I would find my destination, and what the various possibilities were along the way. It gets dark in New Zealand, and I mean very dark. I was saved from despair by a friend back in the UK who was using Google maps to locate me whenever I got lost, and the knowledge that my family were expecting me to arrive at Taupo – and would do something if I didn't. And fortunately, sometime after 1 am, I arrived.

Many of the stories in Luke's gospel are set on the road. It is a road that brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem; it is on a road between Jerusalem and Jericho that a man falls into the hands of robbers, and is subsequently assisted by the Good Samaritan; it is a road that leads the Prodigal Son back home to his father. There is little doubt that the metaphor of journey is of deep significance to Luke. And, while it may be used so frequently it can feel clichéd, the concept of pilgrimage is an important one in most faiths.

In this morning's gospel reading, we find ourselves on the road once more, this time travelling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, which we are told is a journey of some seven miles. It is the evening of that first Easter, and a couple of people, presumably followers of Jesus, are making the journey. We are invited to eavesdrop on their conversation, which begins in a discussion of the events that have just taken place.

It's not long before our pilgrims are joined by Jesus himself, though they do not recognise him. In fact they are initially surprised because he appears not to know what has taken place. So they tell him what has happened from their perspective, explaining what they had hoped for, and making it clear that those hopes have been dashed by recent events. In substance there is nothing inaccurate about what they say, but a simple narration of the events misses the meaning behind them. And so,

as they continue on their journey, Jesus interprets what has happened, explaining how the scriptures have been fulfilled.

As the travellers approach Emmaus, it appears that Jesus will continue his journey alone, but they urge him to stay with them, and he agrees. It is when they dine together, as he breaks bread, that their eyes are opened, and they recognise their fellow traveller.

One of the things that I especially love about this story is the way the disciples then explain what has taken place. "They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"" It is almost as though, in retrospect, they are able to convince themselves that they had recognised Jesus all along. But of course the story tells us that they absolutely *had not*.

It's easy, isn't it, to tell a story differently when we know how it ends. When I think about my journey from Auckland to Taupo, it has become an amusing tale, which I tell light heartedly. That's because it all turned out well. But it isn't the whole story. It ignores a number of decidedly frightening hours.

The ending of today's gospel reading is crucial – those followers of Jesus recognise that they have met their risen Lord, and that will transform their lives. But don't rush on to the ending too quickly – because the journey is equally important. Indeed, had it not been for the journey, their eyes would not have been opened. It was on the journey that they came to really make sense of what had been taking place. That the meaning behind the scriptures was revealed to them. That they saw the connection between the story of Jesus and their own story, making God present in their lives.

There is a general consensus that we are living in unprecedented times. And we all have our own ways of dealing with the uncertainties that arise as a result. It can be quite appealing in a time of such uncertainty to want to know what happens. How this particular story will end. And of course we cannot.

But there is something about the story of the Road to Emmaus that can help us, I think, because it reminds us that it is not only the destination that matters, but also the journey itself. If this current time is one of journeying, today's gospel reading reminds us of the importance of continuing to look for God in our midst. Of continuing to read our scriptures and recognise that we may understand them in new ways because of our current circumstances.

Journeying is not always comfortable, especially when the destination is uncertain. But we are never alone, and it is Luke's contention that the road can be a place where we learn and discover anew. If you, like me, long to have some sense of where all this will lead - or perhaps more accurately long to know that it will all turn out alright – the reminder from the Road to Emmaus is to keep our eyes fixed firmly on God, and our hearts open to God's presence and revelation.

Amen