

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 18th April 2021
The third 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 3:12-19

When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, ‘You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

‘And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.

Luke 24:36-48

Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Sermon

Have you ever had that experience where you have been on holiday with someone, or perhaps on a day trip, and when you have both been describing the experience, it is almost as though you were at completely different places, doing completely different things? It's a problem that the police encounter when they try to piece together what has happened, perhaps at the scene of a crime, or a road accident. Witness statements often don't really match up. On the one occasion that I was asked to give a statement, I was embarrassed at how little I could actually remember. It astonishes me when the police are able to issue a photofit for an individual they are looking for, because I find it difficult to give an accurate description even of people I know quite well.

In certain ways, it seems that human beings make rather unreliable witnesses. Yet this morning's readings are all about being witnesses to our faith. In the reading from Acts, Peter tells his listeners the story of Jesus. He pulls no punches, reminding them of their culpability, yet one phrase stands out: "To this we are witnesses." And the risen Jesus says exactly the same in one of his appearances to the disciples: "You are witnesses of these things."

Hearing these readings, we may want to distance ourselves from the concept of being witnesses. We, after all, are not in the same position as the disciples and early followers. We were not there at the crucifixion. We did not encounter the empty tomb.

And yet our faith calls us to dig deeper. To recognise that the Christian story is one that we are as much a part of as those who lived in first century Palestine. That we too must testify as witnesses.

On Good Friday there was a bit of a furore in the Twitter-sphere. Professor Alice Roberts, a biological anthropologist and President of Humanists UK, put the following message on Twitter: "Just a little reminder today. Dead people – don't come back to life." Whatever we think of the crassness of such a comment on perhaps the most sacred day for Christians, it was the response posted by the Reverend Richard Coles that struck me as the most significant: "Hey, angry Twitter, Alice Roberts is right. Dead people don't come back to life. Believe me, I know. When Christians like me proclaim the resurrection it is not to refute biological truth. It is an expression of faith in the power of God, which is measureless."

By some coincidence, it was on 1st April that Richard Coles's book, "The Madness of Grief" was published, charting his experiences since the death of his partner in December 2019. If anyone is well placed to comment on whether the dead can return to life, it is surely someone who longs for the return of a recently departed loved one.

If we return to those first disciples and followers of the way, those who had experienced first hand the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, their witness was not to immortality for all people. Just think of some of the phrases that we use. We talk about the power of life over death. We say that death no longer has dominion. You may recall the phrase that death has lost its sting.

The Greek word for witness is *martyras*, from which we derive the word martyr. We all know that martyrs die. The point is that they believe that there is something worth dying for.

It is thinking about what it means to be a witness to our faith that actually brings our faith alive. It is what means that we are not simply accepting a series of facts and repeating them week by week, but that instead we are entering into Christ's story and becoming a part of it.

The reason that people use the language of journey and pilgrimage when describing faith is because this is far more resonant of our experiences than a simple acceptance of facts. There is far greater depth in truth than there is in facts – which is not to say that both don't have their place. Just think for a moment about resurrection. In our two readings, we are undoubtedly thinking about the empty tomb and the risen Jesus. Last week we heard of Thomas's encounter with Jesus, and here we have another occasion on which Jesus stood among the disciples. Yet we can dig deeper. Jesus was not going to remain with the disciples for long. So what is it that his resurrection meant for each one of them? We can only speculate – yet given that most of those early disciples died as martyrs, it would be fair to say that they became convinced of something stronger and more important than death. And if we notice what it is that Jesus said to them in this morning's reading and look at the way they responded, we can assume that they devoted their lives to the fulfilment of the scriptures – living out lives of love and service, drawing people into relationship with the loving God.

And I wonder what resurrection means to each one of us. Perhaps you have had an experience of new life being breathed into an aspect of your life. A time of seeing or experiencing things differently – a relationship; a job.

Part of the power of the resurrection is that it enabled followers of Jesus to recognise that in a very real way we – the Church – are indeed the Body of Christ. It is through resurrection that we participate in Christ's work. That we become part of the story of the saving power of God. Which is why our witness is so important. Where is it that we see the work of God, and how is it that we join in? And, just as important, where is it that we see injustice, and how do we speak out?

I began by suggesting that in some ways we can be rather unreliable witnesses – we often struggle to present accurate accounts of what has happened. However, think of a slightly different example. If you are a member of a book group, you will probably find that members of the group have quite different experiences of the books that you read. Each is providing a witness, yet some might notice the details of description; others the range of emotions; others the twists of the plot. As you discuss the book, each member gains a deeper and richer understanding of the book by hearing the responses of others. Each witness is being faithful; yet each has a unique perspective.

And so it is in our journey of faith. We are called to be witnesses. To give our testimony. And we are called to recognise that we walk alongside others, each with their own testimony. We all enter into the same story – the story of God. And our understanding is deeper and richer as we explore, share and live out that story together.

Amen