

## Sermon, Peel Cathedral, Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2022

Readings: Acts 5 27-32; John 20 19-end

A couple of weeks ago I suggested that we could learn by immersing ourselves in Bible stories, perhaps taking on the character of one of the people, and imagining what it was like to be present. Today I'd like to invite you to participate in this idea with today's Gospel reading, by taking the role of one of the disciples.

I'd like you to join me on a Sunday evening, after a very full and difficult week. For the last three years we've been travelling through Israel with Jesus. Who would have thought we would have journeyed so far? We've worn out a pair or two of shoes with all that walking. And we've stayed in some unusual places. Sometimes we've just camped beside the pathways. At others we've been invited into all kinds of homes. On other occasions we've been back in our own territory, able to stay at home or with friends.

There have been times when we've been hungry, and times when there's been plenty. Do you remember that day when there were thousands of people listening to Jesus and it was about to get dark and no-one had eaten all day, and many were a long way from home? And somehow, in the hands of Jesus, 5 small loaves and two fish fed everyone!

Remember those stories Jesus told us? And how often we didn't really understand what he was getting at; and how patient Jesus was in explaining things again to us. And didn't he get under the skin of the Pharisees and other officials! He always had the last word.

Until, of course, he didn't. Thursday night seems such a long time ago. We had no idea that would be the last meal we would share with him. It was odd how he washed our feet. How I wish I'd thought of that and washed his! And then he gave special significance to the very ordinary part of our meal – the bread and the wine. And I really didn't understand what was going on between Judas and Jesus!

There was joy at that meal, but it seeped away after Judas left. And then we walked down to the Garden of Gethsemane. Wasn't it cold and damp! But we were so tired that we managed to fall asleep. Mind I remember hearing Jesus praying with great intensity. But I didn't understand what he meant by asking for the cup to be taken away. There was no cup!

And then we were woken by the kerfuffle of the temple guards coming in and arresting Jesus. Wasn't it scary! And most of us ran away. But, as we've discussed since, it was a very long night with Jesus being taken to the High Priest, to Pilate, to King Herod and back to Pilate. And then it became clear he was going to be crucified.

Do you remember how Jesus had tried telling us several times that he would be killed? We just couldn't believe that anyone would be able to stop his wonderful work of teaching and healing. I'll never forget the sound of the nails being driven through his wrists and into the cross bar. And the way he tried to heave himself up to breathe, and the intense pain he was in with every breath. Thank God it was all over in three hours!

I was numb. I was heart-broken. My dreams had been shattered. What were the last three years about? Where was his kingdom now? I could hardly sleep on Friday night. And wandered in a stupefied daze on Saturday. What could the future possible hold? I was frightened too. They came for Jesus. We'll be next on the list. I don't want to die yet!

And then, this morning, the rumours. First the women and then Peter and John. Telling us that Jesus' body had disappeared. That Jesus had come back to life. Is it true? What does it all mean?

We'd arranged to meet. We locked the doors – we didn't want soldiers bursting in on us. And then, in the middle of our discussions, suddenly, there was Jesus! I've no idea how he got in. But it was definitely him.

He showed us his hands and his side – the scars of the recent nail holes and the wound caused by the soldier's sword. And then he used his usual greeting – *"Peace be with you"*. It was him! Remember how we were all convinced? Even though it seemed impossible, it really was him. Our mood was transformed. Our sadness was transformed into the most incredible joy. Suddenly life seemed worth living again.

And Jesus kept on saying amazing things. There was something different though. I can't quite put my finger on it. It was strange how he breathed on us. It was as though he was transferring something of himself into our very being. *"Receive the Holy Spirit"*, he said. And I breathed in deeply. I didn't want to let my breath go!

And then those challenging words *"If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."* It reminded me of the time when Peter was exasperated with John. Do you remember how he asked Jesus how many times he should forgive him, thinking seven times was plenty? And Jesus said seventy times seven. As if it was possible to keep track of it all! But there's brothers for you.

But these new words give us so much responsibility. Do you remember how upset the scribes and Pharisees were when Jesus told that paralysed man his sins were forgiven? They thought it was blasphemy because only God can forgive sins. But he soon showed them what's what when he healed the man to demonstrate his ability to forgive sins. He just told the man to get up, pick up his mat and go home. And he did! Just like that. And now he's telling us that we too have the ability to forgive.

It sounds so easy, but it is so very difficult. I've been hurt so often. Over and over again I've tried to turn the other cheek, just as Jesus said. But some people are just so unkind, so thoughtless, only able to see things from their own point of view. I don't know how many times I've thought – and sometimes even said "I just can't forgive you for what you've done." But now it seems that if I withhold my forgiveness, then God withholds his too. What a responsibility!

And then Jesus was gone. I don't know how he slipped away. One moment he was right there, talking to us and the next he'd disappeared. We were so excited. But what did it mean? What would happen next? How were we to know what to do, where to go, what to say?

And then we realised that Thomas wasn't with us. And when we caught up with him later, he didn't believe a word of it. He thought we were victims of mass hysteria. After all, it **is** madness to think that someone the Romans crucified could come back to life. I remember his vehemence. He wasn't going to consider believing unless he could put his fingers into the scars of Jesus.

Just as well he was with us the following Sunday. There we were, in the same room, the same time of night, talking and wondering, locked in again in case the soldiers came. And Jesus arrived! Suddenly there he was, standing among us, greeting us in that familiar way: *"Peace be with you!"* Do you remember the shock on Tommy's face? It was as though Jesus had heard him say he needed physical proof, when he held out his hands to show the raw scars, and lifted his tunic to reveal the wound in his side.

But Tommy was convinced already. It was clear when he fell to his knees in worship.

And now we need to pass on the good news to others. We don't know when we'll see Jesus again, but he gave his blessing to all who believe without seeing him in person.

And how will they know if we don't tell them?

Amen