

Address from Bill Pattinson for the Third Sunday of Easter

Resurrection Witnesses, Acts 3:12-19; Luke 24:36-48

“Make no mistake
if he rose at all
it was as his body;
if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the
molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle
the Church will fall.”

These words from “Seven Stanzas at Easter” by the 20th century American poet and author, John Updike, express two powerful truths and one understandable doubt. The first truth is that Christ’s resurrection was physical. He did not appear as a vision or a ghost; the resurrection is not metaphorical as if appearing in the annual visit of Spring; it is not as a Spirit in the mouths and eyes and tongues of the apostles or Saints’ lives through the ages; it was as his flesh and bones, his physical body, which is just like ours, that he appeared to his disciples. The second truth is that if this is not accepted the Church is meaningless and it stands on lies and will fall on its untruths. The Easter story of resurrection is at the epicentre of our faith and beliefs. It is the astonishing good news at the heart of the Christian Gospel. Paul confirms this in his first letter to the Corinthians:

“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” (1Cor.15:14).

The one understandable doubt is revealed in the line “if he rose at all”. People do not rise from the dead - every right thinking person knows this. When I witness my Christian faith by talking of loving your neighbour, or by praying to my Lord, my unbelieving friends understand. When, or should I say if, I speak about Jesus rising from the dead and his promise of eternal life, that’s when I receive the “you must be kidding me” looks. There’s no life after death.

So how do we see the resurrection? How can we become Easter people, witnesses of the resurrection? What does the resurrection mean to us now? What indeed is the resurrection?

Easter is a season of 50 days, during which time we can consider all these questions. Belief in the resurrection requires faith, which can be open to doubt. Jesus tells us we don’t need a huge or large faith, but that even if your faith is the size of a mustard seed you could uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea. You don’t require great

faith rather you require faith in a great God who rose from the dead. During these last ten days, since the Duke of Edinburgh died, I've learnt a great deal about him which I didn't know... and I don't think I'll be alone. For instance, I was unaware he was such an avid reader and had a huge library of thousands of books; that by far the greatest number of these books were on ornithology and religion. Archbishop Justin recounted how the Duke had great faith, but he often questioned Bishops and himself on what they preached. Questioning your faith is, I believe, important.

In mum and dad I had two excellent, but very different, role models. Mum had blind faith. No need to question anything. Questions only confuse you more. "You ask too many questions, our Wills", she would say. "Jesus rose from the dead. In him we also shall have eternal life. That's what I believe and it brings me great joy." Dad, on the other hand, loved to discuss the big questions of faith. "Questioning your doubts strengthens your faith", he would say. Dad had a wonderful, strong faith. He rightly deserved the quotation on the front cover of his Order of Service at his funeral, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

From the day of his resurrection to his ascension, 40 days later, the New Testament recounts twelve resurrection appearances of Jesus, including Paul's vision on the road to Damascus. We can be assured therefore that there were numerous witnesses to the resurrection. In this morning's reading we are treated to one such appearance, the third one in Luke's Gospel. We are told that the eleven disciples with their companions are talking with Cleopas and the other disciple, whose name we are not told, about Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus. Suddenly Jesus himself stands amongst them, offering the conventional Jewish greeting "Shalom" that is "Peace be with you." We read that they were startled and terrified and thought they had seen a ghost. This is not surprising. They had seen Jesus, a human being like themselves, tortured, executed and buried. Are they to believe that he has now been raised to a new life by God? Jesus sees their fears and doubts and shows them his hands and feet, even asks them to touch him to prove he is no ghost, but real flesh and blood. Still the disciples are not fully convinced so Jesus eats a piece of boiled fish in their presence. Surely this is no ghost, no vision but the physical reality of Jesus, who continues to prove his resurrection by opening their minds and telling them all that was written about him in the Scriptures. Before he leaves them he clearly informs the disciples that they are witnesses to these things, commissioning them to go out and tell others.

This is exactly what Peter and John are doing in our first lesson from Acts which Paula has just read. In the name of Jesus, they have just healed a crippled beggar, who was seen daily outside the Temple gate named Beautiful. The people are amazed and flock round the two disciples. Peter addresses the crowd, “You killed the Author of Life whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.” What a wonderful phrase “The Author of Life”. Other Biblical versions talk of the “Prince of Life” and “Leader towards Life”. The risen Jesus is seen as the channel of God’s love, healing and forgiveness. This good news needs to be celebrated. James Tissot, the late 19th Century French painter, did just this in his painting “The Resurrection”, which is now in the Brooklyn Museum, where he depicted Christ coming out of the tomb like an explosion, his figure shining white with radiant vitality. Death has no power to hold him.

Like the disciples in that upper room we come to Church this morning with doubts, confusions, fears and misunderstandings. Like the disciples we need conviction of the risen Christ, whom we now encounter in our worship. We are offered explanation in our readings, preaching and prayers, just as Jesus explained the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and in that upper room. Soon we shall share in eating, just as Jesus ate with his disciples. Let us hope that like the disciples our eyes will become open, our hearts burn with recognition of the risen Lord. So then we may exit this morning as witnesses to Christ and his amazing resurrection, as Easter people. “May we who share Christ’s body live his risen life.” He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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