Sermon for Easter Day Year C

Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12

i

I was at my father’s bedside when he took his last breath. It was one of those moments, like being at the birth of my children that you know at the time are searing themselves into your memory for the rest of your life. We held the funeral service about a week later. I think I had to borrow a black tie because I had just rushed back from New Zealand to his bedside three days before he died.

After the funeral service, life pretty much went back to normal. How different it would have been in Victorian England with very strict rules about what people should wear and about dressing the house in black ribbons. I would have worn black gloves and a black band around my hat for a year. Things were far more complex for women, especially close relatives. My mother would have been in mourning dress for two years, my sister for one year, my son would have had black gloves for six months. I would now be wearing black today for my mother who died less than a year ago.

In Jerusalem in the days of Jesus burial customs were more like the complicated Victorian ritual than our modern, get- back- to- normal- life attitude of today.

After the person’s last breath and before sunset that day, the deceased would be placed in a tomb, laid out on a stone shelf. Mourning rituals would then commence which started with anointing the body with perfumes and spices and ended a full 12 months later with another service known as the *ossilegium.*

The idea was that the flesh retained the sins of the flesh and as the flesh disappeared, so the person’s sins were dissolved away. The bones, however, were thought to contain the essence of the person, and so after 12 months the bones were collected and placed in a box or ossuary, long enough for the long thigh bone to fit. This ceremony of collecting the bones was the *ossilegium.*

The Jews spoke in poetic language of their belief in resurrection – unless they were Sadducees who didn’t believe in resurrection. But for the majority who did, they spoke of the bones being like the post of a loom on which God would weave a new body, or the spindle of a scroll on which God would write a new story at the End of Time at the resurrection. Inkpots and spindles have been found in some graves of this period.

Criminals who had suffered capital punishment would have been placed into a supervised grave so that the criminal was also being punished in death by being denied the mourning rituals and support of his family. But as the body decayed, even the sins of a malefactor were dissolved away, so that the bones of criminals were returned to their families after one year.

Perhaps Matthew’s reference to guards by the tomb supposes such a burial. Or did Pilate deliberately over-ride the customs of the Sanhedrin because he disagreed with their guilty verdict [see Sermon for Good Friday Year C]? That would support the Ethiopian tradition that Pilate became a believer during the course of the trial.

Was Joseph of Arimathea supplying a tomb to the Sanhedrin for use as a supervised grave for criminals, or was he, more likely, thumbing his nose at the Sanhedrin’s guilty verdict, and with Pilate’s connivance, taking the body out of their jurisdiction for a private and honourable burial?

The disciples and the other followers of Jesus clearly believed Jesus to have been innocent of the charge of blasphemy. But that does not mean to say they expected the resurrection. All the Gospel narratives speak of their amazement, confusion, fear and doubts. Such an account is far more believable than some heroic expectation of Christ’s victory over the grave.

The disciples would have believed in the resurrection, but they would have expected it to happen for Jesus, like for the rest of us, at the End of Time. To have brought the End of Time into the present just caused utter confusion. It took a little while for them to believe it was possible. In all the Gospels we have accounts of their doubts and lack of comprehension.

Being raised on the Third Day overturns the Sanhedrin’s guilty verdict. Christ did not need to lie in the tomb for his dissolving flesh to bear his sins away, because he had no sin. God had declared Christ innocent of all charges and therefore the One whose message could be relied on as true.

ii

Turning now to the details of Luke’s narrative, we note that the women went to the tomb “very early”. In other Gospels we are told it was still dark. They went at the earliest possible moment after Passover which had delayed the ritual of anointing the body.

The Gospels differ as to the precise make-up of the group of women. Luke says they found the stone rolled away. Presumably they had intended they would have moved the stone themselves.

In Mark there is only one angel, but in Luke it is two. Does this reflect the customary need for two witnesses for a court of law? The angels are referred to as male – thus the Jewish requirement for having two male witnesses was fulfilled – whilst the Church receives the first news and testimonies of the resurrection from women. This is a detail they would not have invented for themselves.

The women are on holy ground in the presence of angels and they bow down to the ground – perhaps to shield their eyes from the bright light of their raiment, but possibly also in obeisance.

There is a rebuking tone to what the angels say: Why do you search for the living among the dead? Clearly the women should have expected the resurrection because of what Jesus had clearly explained to them before leaving Galilee that he should be “handed over to sinful men, be crucified and three days later rise to life” (v7).

Is Luke speaking to his readers here and telling us that we should not have doubts about the resurrection; we should believe what we have been told?

If it is Luke’s intention to commend faith to those who have not seen and yet believe, a theme taken up by John’s Easter account, Luke includes the disciples in that too.

For Luke does not hesitate to recount to us that the disciples heard the women’s tale and took it for a load of nonsense – and they too had heard what Jesus had told them when still in Galilee. The angels would have had even harsher words for them.

The women go and tell the eleven disciples “and all the rest.” Who were these people who make up “all the rest”? Presumably they would include any other women who had not come to the tomb, such as Mary the Mother of Jesus, and the two we hear of walking towards Emmaus in the following part of the chapter, who report to the man (Jesus) they had failed to recognise as yet that:

*Some of the women of our group surprised us; they went at dawn to the tomb, but could not find his body. They came back saying they had seen a vision of angels who told them that he is alive. Some of our group went to the tomb and found it exactly as the women had said, but they did not see him (Luke 24:22-24).*

Luke mentions only Peter going to the tomb to check out the women’s story, but clearly he was not alone, as we have just seen, the two from Emmaus refer to “some” going to the tomb to check out the story. It is John who names the two as Peter and the Beloved disciple – again sending two men to act as witnesses would be in keeping with Jewish legal tradition.

Luke tells us that Peter, the leader of the disciples, saw the empty grave and left in amazement. As yet, he did not understand; he did not yet believe. Luke tells us later in the chapter that Peter has a special visit from the risen Lord during the day (Luke 24:34).

iii

It is the resurrection appearances that change everything and move people from doubt and confusion to belief. Only the Beloved disciple in John’s Gospel, often thought to be speaking of himself, claims to have seen the empty grave and the grave clothes and believed. The rest require the sight – and perhaps also the physical touching of the risen Jesus - for them to believe.

What does it take for you to believe?

We cannot go to examine the empty tomb like Peter. We cannot rely on meeting angels who scold us for our lack of faith. Jesus will not walk with us in the shopping mall even on a Sunday when we should be at church. We cannot witness him eat fish (Luke 24:42-43) or place our finger in his wounds (John 20:27).

Firstly, we believe despite not seeing for ourselves because those who were there did see. Unlike them who could not believe the reports of their own group of friends, we do believe because they did come to understand, they did come to see, they did witness to the resurrection and take the consequences. Once they believed they believed to the end.

Secondly, we believe because the Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirit that this is true. We may not see physically, but we see, feel and touch and hear Jesus’ presence in the inner spiritual way of the Holy Spirit speaking to our spirit. This is what Wesley called the New Birth when the Spirit of God awakens our spiritual senses. But that is a sermon for Pentecost.

Thirdly, we have been told through the tradition of our scriptures the same as the first disciples were told. Jesus speaks now to us through the medium of the printed word on the page. This testimony may be second hand, coming through to us from the apostolic witnesses, but in their records of what Jesus said and did, we become part of the witnessing crowd ourselves.

We are part of the crowd on Good Friday, we stand at the cross, and we walk to Emmaus and what we hear Jesus say to the first to believe, through the records of scripture, Jesus can speak to us.

Neither the angels at the tomb nor Jesus speaking to those on the road to Emmaus, whom he calls fools for being so slow to understand (Luke 24:25), show a great deal of patience with the disciples who still do not believe. The message is clear. Jesus, the angels and the Gospel writers are telling us that like the first disciples we have heard, seen, been taught enough – we **should believe.**

Today is not a day for excuses but because of all that has gone before us must be a day of joyful acclamation: Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard April 2015**