

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter 26.4.15
St James, Cambridge – The Revd Deborah Ford

Lectionary Texts: Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-end

John 10:11-18

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me...” (Psalm 23:1,4)

I don't know about you, but this is one of my favourite times of the year... these precious weeks after Easter, when we try to take in the meaning of the resurrection. And the timing and quality of spring this year has really helped: the blossom is more beautiful than *ever*, isn't it?

As they begin to discover that Jesus is no longer dead and buried -we're invited to join the disciples trying to take in what's just happened: Mary in the garden; Thomas in the locked upper room; the disciples on the Emmaus Rd. “What does it *mean* that Jesus is risen from the dead? What does it mean that the scriptures have been fulfilled? What does it mean that he is *alive*?”

And the story goes on in Acts, where we see the effects of people living out of the life and power of the risen Jesus in and among them.

The Holy Spirit has been poured out... (in Luke's account there's a gap between the crucifixion and Pentecost, but in John, it's at the moment when Jesus breathes out his Spirit from the cross).

I wonder what it all means to you?

I think it's very easy for us to think of the resurrection as if Jesus has been 'resuscitated' somehow: the sort of scene we'd see on 'Casualty' with paramedics and heart paddles shocking someone's heart back into rhythm again: brought back to life.

And, after all, that would be *wonderful*, wouldn't it? Any of you who've lost loved ones must be able to imagine that... If they could just come back as they were. But much as his friends might have wanted Jesus to come back and be

and carry on exactly as he had *before* the crucifixion, something *much greater* has happened....

A *radical* re-ordering and healing of the structures of society and of all creation has begun and *will be fulfilled in the One in whom all things hold together*’ ((*Colossians 1:17*): *all that resists, undermines, opposes and distorts Gods’ life and love and truth in us.*

Something *amazing* has happened on the cross: a new *power* has been released and absolutely nothing or no-one is going to stop it!

Already, in today’s reading from Acts, Peter and John have been arrested and are in prison as a result of the number of people hearing their testimonies and believing and being baptised in the name of Jesus. And that’s exactly how it carries on: with one account after another of the various ways in which the religious and political authorities (who’re deeply jealous and threatened by what’s happening) are doing their utmost to kill it off: further arrests, floggings, imprisonments and even more murder and persecutions... And it *still* goes on, doesn’t it? Just think of persecutions in Armenia, the Yemen, Nigeria, Kenya, Pakistan, Syria.... Staying true to Jesus can be very costly.

But the apostles have discovered a new freedom and peace and joy from living in the power of the resurrected Spirit of Jesus: death and evil have lost their sting: they are not frightened of *anyone* or *anything* that can be done to them any more. They’re even able to rejoice “**that they’re considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of Jesus’ name.**” (5:41)

Whatever it costs, they know it’s *more* than worth it. And the more they testify to the resurrection of Jesus, the more “great grace is upon them all...” (4:33) Even as he provokes the rage and hostility of the powers-that-be as he speaks, Stephen’s face “shines like an angel...” (Acts 6:15)

The Word is alive! It is *true*!

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and so not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.... [says the Lord] For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace’

and the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song...” (Isaiah 55:10-13)

The Word that became flesh and dwelt among us is *still* alive and active: just as God promised.

gently yet firmly transforming us into the ways of his Spirit and the way of Love: *reaching out* to others, rather than turning in on and putting ourselves first.

It’s what changes us from being ‘hired hands’ (who run away when we see the ‘wolf’ coming) and the good shepherd, of whom Jesus says:

“I am the good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord....” (John 10:17-18)

I think I felt a bit like a hired hand the other week... Not that there were any particular ‘wolves’ around: it was when Stan and I were running the ‘Decorate an Easter Cookie’ table at the Good Friday activity session...

It was great fun – very sticky – and very popular because of the bowls filled with sugar, sweets and icing. One of the children who came to decorate a cookie was Cleo (whom you’ll all know from the Sunday School ‘slot’) and our conversation went something like this:

(Me): “Hello Rhiannon! How nice to see you! What shape of cookie would you like?”

(Cleo): “My name’s Cleo, not Rhiannon – or Chloe. *You always* get my name wrong...”

And she was right: I did. It was awful... I’d never really got to know or see her enough to be able to distinguish her as *herself*. All I could do was say “You’re right: I’m really sorry” – and hope that she would forgive me and give me another chance.

I can tell you, I’m now completely confident I’ll never forget her name again – she’s made a real impact on me - she’s ‘imprinted’ herself on me in a way: she’s become part of me and I’m hugely grateful to her.

That’s the sort of knowing and loving Jesus is talking about... As Isaiah puts it: “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands....” (Isaiah 49:15-16)

But it's counter-intuitive in a culture that shapes us to value independence, autonomy and professionalism so highly. When I go to visit patients on the wards in the hospital, the nursing staff hardly ever know people by name any more: they are usually simply a bed number...

Our second reading (the first letter of John) is written to a community who are really struggling and divided: ignoring each others' needs and tempted to give up on the sort of love Jesus has preached and shown.

It *is* sometimes tempting to give up and in to the voices of doubt, suspicion, cynicism. Where's the sense and good news in *that* sort of life and love? What's the point? Strength that's made perfect in weakness? Encourages you to give your money away? Wash one another's feet? Lay down your life? It doesn't seem to be making much difference... Just look at the state the world is in. But Jesus is very clear: he says the only way to really *find* our lives is to surrender them.

Just the other day I was talking to someone who's been badly hurt by various relationships and experiences within her family. She's in a fairly new relationship with someone and it's terrifying for her to risk and trust love... "I'm not sure I can... Maybe it's better to live and rely on myself and not need anyone else... then I can't get hurt."

Now I certainly can't claim to be any sort of sheep expert, but it seems to me that the sheep in whose voice the psalm is written is a pretty remarkable sheep: a sheep who recognises and knows her Shepherd's voice and trusts him completely: **"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me."**

She seems to be a sheep who is able to resist following the crowd and can hear the voice of wisdom. But the amazing thing is, whether or not *we* recognise it, Jesus knows each of us by name and is with us and calling to us every single day, waiting and hoping for the moment when we will respond.

We *are* surrounded by systems, which encourage us to be suspicious and fear that even in God there is never going to be enough for us all. A friend of mine in Dorset told me yesterday how she'd just driven past a house on her way home and noticed a sign on the front lawn, which seemed to be utterly serious, saying 'Protect the rich: vote UKIP.'

The writer of 1 John is saying ‘Don’t give in or up.... Don’t *let* your hearts condemn and undermine God’s truth in you’: **“Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God.... Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action...”** (1 John 3:21, 18) *Persevere* in the ordinary loving of everyday life... *ask and trust* in the power of the Spirit to help you.

Often it only takes something very little to make a huge difference, doesn’t it? A smile of encouragement or look of understanding... a little offering and gesture of love, playing our part in the bigger whole. A poster on the wall of an office I used to work in had a picture of the sea stretching as far as the eye could see, with a quote from Mother Theresa: “Don’t say ‘It’s only a drop’... the ocean is made up of drops!”

So *whatever’s* going on for us, Jesus invitation to us is: ‘Come to me... I will give you *all* that you need and *more*.... Let me fill you with the life, peace and strength of my Spirit... Don’t underestimate and limit what I can do!’

Jesus inviting us *all* to know and grow in the meaning and freedom of his resurrection...the freedom to be and do *anything in him!*

Peter and John, *know* Christ and the power of his resurrection.... Jesus’ “Do not be afraid... Peace be with you” are not just ‘words’ they have to trust and believe any more... they are a *lived reality and experience*: a living presence within them. And it’s not a glib triumphalism: they have seen and know that Jesus’ risen body carries *wounds*.

It’s the difference between when Jesus says to the disciples at the beginning of John, ‘*What* are you looking for?’ and when he meets Mary (mistaking him for the gardener) at the end and asks ‘*whom* do you seek?’ Jesus is a *who*: he’s the “I am” in whom we find our deepest meaning and identity: our deepest sense of meaning, home, belonging and purpose.

“I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father....” (John 10:14)

“As you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”
(John 17:21-23)

So as we prepare for Prayer 48 next weekend and for all God has for us together in the months and years to come, let us pray to go deeper into the name of Jesus -his name in us- and the peace and joy of his resurrection.

The poet Patrick Kavanagh describes the resurrection as “a laugh set loose for ever..”

How attractive is *that*?!

Let us pray:

“Risen Christ,
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:
teach us to hear your voice
and to follow your command,
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,
to the glory of God the Father.” Amen.

(Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter)

Acts 4 ‘Peter and John before the Council’

[While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, ²much annoyed because they were teaching the people and *proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead*. ³So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.]

⁵ The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, ‘*By what power or by what name did you do this?*’ ⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹This Jesus is “*the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.*” ¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’

Psalm 23 ‘The Divine Shepherd’

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
³ he restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name’s sake.
⁴ *Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil;
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff—
 they comfort me.*

5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

1 John 3:16-end

¹⁶*We know love by this: that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹*Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;* ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10:11-18

11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³*The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.* ¹⁴*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,* ¹⁵*just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.* ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because *I lay down my life in order to take it up again.* ¹⁸*No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'*