

**1Wheatley United Reformed Church****Sunday 19 April 2015**

Psalm 4; Acts 3.12-19; I John 3.1-7; Luke 24.26b-48

'You are witnesses of these things'

Despite my tendency to acquire dents and scratches on my car, usually through my own fault, I have only been involved in one accident. I was going over the green light at a junction in Brighton in the 1980s when suddenly, out of nowhere, I was hit by another car. As neither of us was going at any speed, no one was injured, but my car was badly smashed and had to be abandoned. I assumed it was my fault. When the police arrived I could give them no clear indication of what had happened, except that as far as I knew I was simply driving straight across a green light. Fortunately I had two passengers in the back, who realised that another driver had turned right across me and was responsible for the accident. In the shock that followed the crash I was unable to provide any explanation of its cause: there was a before and an afterwards, but the moment itself was beyond my power to recall with accuracy.

This is an entirely normal human response to an event which comes out of the blue and interrupts the rhythms of daily life, and it's one others here will have experienced. I was a witness to the accident but an incoherent one, while my passengers were better able to answer the policeman's questions. In any case, he could tell at once from where the cars had ended up exactly what had caused the accident. And that's about as near as I can come to understanding why incoherent witness is part of the Resurrection narratives in all the Gospels. That someone should rise from the dead does not fit in at all with our perception of how things work. People don't suddenly appear when you have watched them die and be buried in a chamber sealed by a large stone rolled across the entrance, except possibly as ghosts, if such phenomena exist. The Gospels all agree that something momentous happened which transformed the first disciples from fearful and defeated people to confident and unafraid witnesses of a new power abroad in the world. They all agree that this power was released by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But when it comes to how it happened and to whom the risen Jesus first revealed himself, they are not coherent. This worries some people, who try to make all the bits fit together to construct a watertight account, which seems to me to be a self-defeating exercise. We have to accept that the details

vary between the Gospels. In fact, rather than being an obstacle to faith, this incoherence seems to me an entirely human reaction in the face of an experience which didn't fit any normal category of human experience, and it makes the accounts as we have them more trustworthy than fanciful. After all, if you were making a story up you would take great care to make all the details agree. If on the other hand something happens which confounds everything you have come to believe or shocks you because it is so unexpected, you are likely to give a somewhat confused account of it.

Luke's account of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples, among whom he includes their companions, takes place straight after two of them have returned to Jerusalem, having encountered the risen Lord on the Emmaus road. They had left the city for home in a state of shock and grief. Famously, they fail to recognize him as he joins them on the way; only when they invite him to stay with them and he blesses bread and breaks it with them do they understand who he is, and in that very instant of comprehension, he is gone. Now they wonder how they can have been so blind, since their hearts had been burning within them as they walked along and he opened the Scriptures to them. As they share their experience with those who had stayed behind, Jesus is suddenly among them and they are terrified. Only Luke tells us that they thought he was a ghost, and has him ask for a piece of grilled fish to prove that he isn't. The detail is strange, but it's surely a way of saying that he is real, not a phantom or a fantasy. John too will feature fish, at the lakeside breakfast after the miraculous catch in his last chapter, only there it is associated with the bread which Jesus also gives to the startled disciples, in a gesture reminiscent of the Last Supper. We could speculate for ever on how to reconcile all these different appearances of the risen Lord, but the effort would be wrongly directed. What they all tell us in their differing ways, with all the trueness to life of people reacting with bewilderment to something beyond their comprehension, is that the Jesus who was crucified and buried stood among them and lives were changed.

Two interesting emphases come through today's readings from Acts and Luke – not surprising, perhaps, since the author of both is the same. One concerns the interpretation of the Scriptures, the other is found in the calling of the disciples to be

witnesses. Biblical interpretation and witness don't seem to be natural bedfellows, but they both tell us something important. A great deal of the ministry of Jesus is spent arguing about how to interpret what we call the Old Testament, and especially the finer points of the Law. Jesus characteristically turns to the prophets for inspiration, to rescue religion, as he sees it, from being turned into a travesty of its true purpose; into impositions and burdens which weigh people down, and into self-congratulation for having God on your side. He preaches a message which exposes human hypocrisy, opens the door to all those who were shut out, and proclaims the liberating power of life lived under grace. One of the signs he gives is to heal people of sickness; sometimes physical, sometimes mental; sometimes the consequence of other people's cruelty and exclusion. So it's all of a piece to find that the first miracle his newly emboldened disciples perform is the healing of a man lame from birth at one of the Temple gates. When Peter addresses the crowd after the man is restored to health he tells them that God's power has been at work here through his servant Jesus, who is now risen from the death in which they had colluded, in ignorance rather than through malice, he adds – a significant distinction. Of this, he adds, we are witnesses. Who more so than Peter, the man who had denied his Lord and wept in shame, who had fled from the scene of crucifixion, yet is now emboldened to speak and act in his name. When Jesus addresses the disbelieving disciples after eating fish with them, he opens their minds to understand how the Law, the prophets and the psalms have been fulfilled and tells them: 'You are witnesses of these things'. He makes two radical claims in this respect: that the Scriptures point to a Messiah who was to suffer and yet rise again, rather than the triumphant leader most people expected; and that the mission his followers are to undertake is to be a universal one, not restricted to those born into a particular community, let alone those who believe their righteousness has earned them God's favour.

Disciples are to be witnesses – but to what? And what does our witness as a Christian community look like to the world beyond these walls, with our doors so firmly locked most of the time and our arguments so often about trivial things? Do we witness to a Christ who opens out the Scriptures in such a way that they welcome the stranger and make space for those who have been shut out by other harsher

interpretations? Do we witness to a place of homecoming for those who are searching or who have lost their way? There are lots of things our church communities do well enough: a strong witness to mutual care and support, to active involvement in movements devoted to the building of a more just and fairer world. Many members and friends of this congregation take their discipleship with them into what we call ‘the world’ – you know, the world which God loved so much that he gave his only Son for it to rise with him from deadness to life. But I have the niggling feeling that something may be missing; something which we should own as a community and which makes a fundamental difference to people in need; which helps them to understand that the Scriptures do not condemn them but invite them; which makes a practical difference to their lives; something which, in the end, brings healing. The kinds of miracles recorded in the Gospels and here in Acts can cause us difficulties with their language of evil spirits and their assumption that physical disability can be magicked away. We have more scientific explanations and cures. But there can be no doubt of the vast amount of brokenness and despair in the world all around us, crying out to be healed. How, as witnesses of the risen power of Christ, do we engage in practical and feasible ways with that?

Let me give you an example. At the end of March I was very involved in running a conference in Oxford to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Teresa of Avila, writer, mystic and saint. You might think that what she wrote so long ago was of interest only to specialists and antiquarians or at best to the very spiritual. But one of the papers we heard, by an American professor, struck a very different note. She uses the insights of Teresa of Avila gained through her own struggle to be heard and her own experience of rejection by the male hierarchy of the Church of her day to help abused women rediscover their true selves, and to do this she has bought a house which provides them with a new community and a safe space they had not known before. I find that commitment to engaging with the wisdom of the past in order to make a difference to people whose self-respect has been seriously damaged and who are hurting badly now to be a moving act of witness to the call of the Scriptures to bind up the broken-hearted and to the power of the risen Lord to continue his ministry of healing through his disciples today.

In her speech accepting Nobel Prize for Literature 1993, the black American novelist Toni Morrison, best known for her novel *Beloved*, told the tale of a conversation between an old black woman who is blind and wise and some young children who demand that she answer an age-old riddle: 'Is the bird I am holding living or dead?' Her reply was: 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands'. Well, I don't know how Christ was raised from the dead or to whom he appeared and when, since the Gospels, Acts and Epistles give us hints and glimpses, not facts and figures. But I do know that he stands among us, even when the doors are locked, and that he has entrusted the power of his rising to our hands, as he asks us to be the witnesses of his transforming, healing love; not in word only, but to make clear to our contemporaries what wonders it yet may perform when we let it loose in the world.