

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 27 April 2014 (Year A – Easter 2)
Psalm 16; Acts 2.14a, 22-32; I Pet.1.3-9; John 20.19-31

We all get nervous as well as excited when our lives change. Do you remember your apprehension the first day you moved from one school to another? Where is everything? What will the teachers be like? Will I make any friends? It's the same when we have to make decisions about changing jobs or moving house. Is it the right decision (probably)? Will I ever find my dream house (probably not)? How will I cope with having to start learning the ropes all over again (pretty well)? When you look back, of course, you find it hard to understand why you had these feelings at all. After all, you settled down quickly enough into the new routine, worked out where you needed to be, got used to the quirks of a new home. And then, just when you have got yourself nicely settled, the chance comes to move on again. Humans may be very adaptable creatures, but that doesn't stop us from worrying about change.

I've been trying to work out why the Easter stories as the Gospels record them are so full of fear, uncertainty, and disbelief, and these kinds of experiences are as near as I can get. A change in the expected order of things can be exhilarating but also deeply disturbing. We become such creatures of routine, and that's by no means a bad thing. I notice how my cat adopts predictable patterns of behaviour for long periods and get worried when he's not where I expect him to be at particular points in the day. I imagine all our pets, feline, canine and other, react quite badly to enforced change; and so can we. After all, it's comforting to know what the week ahead holds in store, and it would be quite testing if we had to make up each day as it came along. That's no doubt why we all get attached – too attached, probably – to certain customs and practices in church life which are probably no older than our memories, and react badly if they are threatened.

The Easter story ought to come blazing into our lives with an irresistible force; and yet it doesn't. The Gospel writers tell of fear, locked doors, failure to recognize a familiar figure, disbelief; and go as far as telling us in one case that the apostles thought the women's claim to have seen Christ risen were nonsense. They do not show us Christ bursting from the tomb; that has been left for artists and musicians to

imagine. They speak instead of an empty tomb, angelic messengers, puzzling words; of a Christ who appears in the midst of the disciples though the doors are locked, or glimpsed by the shores of a lake when they are out fishing. I think that if I were trying to persuade people that the Resurrection was a fact I would not be quite so downbeat about it. Spin-doctors would be whispering in my ear ‘Play it up for all it’s worth!’ and the TV would be full of interviews with excited people who had seen a man who was supposed to be dead and buried. There would be sceptics, too, of course, pooh-poohing the whole business, as a clever fake or some kind of mass delusion. But then what? It would fade from our screens and therefore from our consciousness, like everything does once it’s no longer deemed newsworthy; like the human cost of war or the sufferings of those condemned to scratch a meagre living from the soil and dying of hunger when the rains fail, the moment a celebrity dies or is accused of a sex crime. I’m not worried about our short attention spans when it comes to the trivia we are served up most of the time; what really gets me, because at heart it’s part of the spiritual sickness of our society, is the shortness of those spans for anything that really ought to demand our attention and our energies.

So can it be that the Gospel writers were on to something when they paint the resurrection appearances of Jesus in such uncertain strokes? Do they present it as something inherently mysterious and puzzling because they are confused about it themselves or because they are trying to make sense of what it might mean? As I reread their accounts I was particularly struck by something they all have in common. The appearances of the risen Lord after that first early morning encounter with Mary of Magdala are nearly always collective: they come to the disciples when they have gathered together or are about their daily business, fishing by the lake. And they always come with a summons to action, a command: ‘Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee’; ‘Touch me and see’; ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’; and then, to Thomas the doubter, ‘Put your finger here; reach out your hand; do not doubt, but believe’. There is, by the way, a fascinating contrast between Jesus’s command to Mary not to touch him and his invitation to the disciples by the lake and to Thomas to do just that. But that’s for exploration another time. Thomas could be any one of us or our contemporaries, struggling to make sense of what he has been told when

everything about his understanding and experience of the world tells him that death is the end. In his journey of faith he travels further and in a shorter time than the other disciples or even Paul on the Damascus road: one moment it's the defiant rejection of 'Unless I see the mark of nails' and the next it's a confession which goes beyond anything they have managed: 'My Lord and my God!' What Jesus then says is clearly addressed more to the future than to him: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'.

The disciples are witnesses of the resurrection as an event which does not fit their picture of how the world works. It leaves them both bewildered and encouraged, which is pretty much what many of us feel. Except in the fantasy worlds of science fiction, we cannot travel back to that moment and check out the details, let alone see and touch for ourselves. Time moves constantly forward, stranding in a past we cannot reach all those who have embodied the wisdom of the ages. But if we cannot see them and touch them, we can hear their voices; or at least see something of the truths by which they lived and died reflected back to us through the written word, however opaquely. I do not think we can prove or disprove the resurrection of Jesus. After all these years, it still seems to me the only explanation which makes any sense of what followed, less problematic than the others which have been offered from the moment Matthew records the rumour that the disciples stole the body. Our response to it must therefore come from somewhere other than intellectual enquiry alone (though this is part of it). That, I think, is where the summons to action which accompanies each appearance comes in; that in whatever ways we can, we are invited to continue to witness to the resurrection, through what we do as a community and the way we order our lives as individuals. Where people hide behind locked doors in fear, whatever those doors may be, the world needs witnesses to show that the prisons of hatred and prejudice and bigotry humans so often construct cannot keep the risen Lord out. Where people dismiss the story of Christ's resurrection as infantile fantasy there is always the possibility that he will come to them through the doors they have so carefully constructed to keep him out, and they will touch his wounds in their imagination and seek to become healers of human hurt.

But I also think that the Gospel writers tell us the story in the way they do because it is the beginning of something, not the end. Christ is risen to assure us that God's love continues to hold us despite our inevitable physical dissolution. That rising is also the sign that everything which hurts, labels, belittles or condemns any of God's children is to be confronted and will in the end be defeated by a power greater than any those works of death can command. That is the Church's mission, one which in our own small and unglamorous ways in our local communities of faith we are to embrace. And because even that seems too great a burden for any of us to bear, God's Holy Spirit is at work within us as soon as we begin, to lighten the load, put a spring in our step, and empower us to do what by our own efforts we could never achieve.

If one of my students had ever produced an essay which reached a conclusion and then started all over again before drawing a second conclusion I would no doubt have had a few things to say about how you should structure an argument. But that is exactly what John's Gospel does. John tells us at the end of chapter 20 why he has written his account: that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name. And then he carries on: 'After these things', with his story of Christ's appearance by the lakeside and his questioning of Peter as to whether or not he loved him. John's last words are open-ended, too: he tells us that Jesus did many other things and that 'if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written'. There it is, in a nutshell. We are being invited to write new books about the work of the risen Christ in a vastly different world from John's; different, that is, in terms of its scientific and technological knowledge; but still, I suspect, the same, in the longing of the human heart for a world both here and hereafter in which death shall have no dominion and life in all its fullness shall spring up in every wasteland.