

30 Apr 2017 LAST WORDS

Reading Luke 24: 36-53

So we've reached the final part of our mini-series on Luke's account of the Easter story, and now Easter day is drawing to a close. We heard two weeks ago how the women went to Jesus's tomb early in the morning to anoint the body, and found the stone rolled away. A stone rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let them in so they could see that the tomb was empty...Jesus had risen! Then last week Tim Hedgecock took us through the story of how, later in the afternoon, Jesus appeared to two people on the road to Emmaus, and they realised who their companion was through the breaking of bread. Though it was getting late they rushed back to Jerusalem to find the other disciples and tell them the news.

But where were the other disciples? They were hiding away ...they were confused, they were devastated, they were grieving, they were ashamed and they were scared. In the corresponding passage in John chapter 20 we read that "*the door was locked*" for fear of the Jews...they were wanting to be invisible, out of sight. They also didn't really believe the first reports of Jesus' resurrection; dead men don't rise from the dead! The Romans were rather good at killing people, they didn't make mistakes, and if you look at the description of the crucifixion in John you see some of the measures they took to make sure he was dead...they stuck a spear into his side. So when the women came back from the tomb...chapter 24 v10 "*they did not believe them, because their words seemed like nonsense to them*". And even Peter, who'd actually seen the empty tomb himself "was wondering to himself what had happened".... He'd seen it with his own eyes, but he still didn't fully understand what had happened.

Unexpected visitors

Then we have the completely unexpected arrival of those two people late in the evening. They had probably said goodbye to the other disciples earlier in the day and they weren't expected back. So how do you think they were when they arrived back at the house where the disciples had gathered? Emmaus was six or seven miles away from Jerusalem...they had walked there and now they had run back. It would have been like walking from Chineham to Oakley, and then running back. They would have been hot, sweaty, puffed out, red in the face, probably banging frantically at the door, staggering in, blurting their words out. They were definitely an unexpected arrival.

And while they were still talking, then suddenly there was a second unexpected arrival ...Jesus himself. Jesus was standing in the middle of them...had he also run back from Emmaus, was he hot sweaty and out of breath. Was he banging on the door to be let in? No, Jesus miraculously appeared, v36 "*he stood among them*" ...It wasn't as though he appeared in the distance as some sort of vague outline, a bit like me standing here and trying work out whose moving around outside in the entrance area. No Jesus, the man they had lived with for three years, was in the middle of them.

The physical evidence

Now you might expect at this point that the disciples would break out in rejoicing and celebration....they had heard that the tomb was empty from the women and from Peter, and then they had the story from the two men who'd been on the road to Emmaus... and now here He was. But it says they were frightened and perhaps even more confused. They thought they were seeing a ghost! Perhaps it's not so surprising given their mental state. When you're distressed and upset you don't see things in the right way, and you misinterpret things. And perhaps that's what's happening here. The disciples clearly believed in ghosts and it was probably easier for the disciples to believe in a "ghostly" Jesus than one who was physically there...after all they were gathered in a locked house, so Jesus couldn't have come through the door. The ghost explanation made sense, and it was their first (and seemingly unanimous) conclusion.

So what does Jesus do at this point...well it's interesting what the passage DOESN'T say. It doesn't say he told the disciples off...he didn't scold them...he didn't say you stupid and unbelieving people. He recognised where the disciples were at their point of need, he recognised that they were confused and traumatised by the events of the past three days. We don't have God who doesn't recognise when we are struggling in our faith, we have a God who understands us and meets us where we are. In v38-43 we read Jesus graciously gave lots of physical evidence of his physical resurrection...he was not a ghost. Firstly he encouraged them to touch, he had flesh and bones. The warm body of a living person. Secondly, this wasn't someone imitating Jesus...he says look at my wounds, look at my hands and feet. The unmistakable marks of the crucifixion were on his physical body. We know that one of the disciples, Thomas, wasn't present in the room at this time and later he asked to put his fingers into the holes in Jesus's hands...and I wonder whether the rest of the disciples were doing the same thing, just to be sure. Film make-up artists can do some fantastic things... , but they would never make an actual hole in someone's hand. This was the genuine Jesus killed on the cross, died and buried....not someone dressed up in Jesus'

clothes and made to look like him by an ancient Jewish make-up artist. Finally, the third piece of physical evidence was that Jesus ate some of the fish which they were having for supper....I don't know what would happen if a ghost tried to eat something, but I would imagine the fish falling through the body and onto the floor. Yes, there was something miraculous about this body. Jesus had appeared in a room with a locked door, clearly that's not normal...but it was definitely Him.

The scriptural evidence

So do you remember these , the multi-coloured circles with hidden numbers in them, perhaps they were shown to you by an optician, or I can remember something like this being done by the school nurse...if you could read the numbers, then great you were ok, but if you could not...if it was just a sea of dots...then you were colour blind. You could see, but you couldn't see, you could see lots of dots but you couldn't get the meaning of the picture. And it was a bit like that with the disciples and the Old Testament scriptures...they knew their scriptures, they were devout practicing Jews, they would have heard them being read out in the Synagogue every week. And during his ministry Jesus had tried to explain lots of the scriptures. But although they could see the dots, they could not see the picture. They weren't colour blind but they were "scripture blind". So Jesus needed to do something about this. In verses 44-49 Jesus moves on to explain that the events of the last few days had been prophesied in scripture. *He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."*

The Jews divided the scriptures into three main sections, the law, the psalms and the prophets, so when Jesus refers to these three areas he was in effect saying the entire Old Testament was foretelling His rejection, suffering, death and resurrection. And it's interesting that Luke says Jesus "*opened their minds to understand*"...the disciples had heard these scriptures many times, sometimes directly spoken by Jesus. But **without the spirit of God**, they could not **understand the things of God**. We aren't told specifically which passages of scripture Jesus was referring to , but perhaps Psalm 22 v 16 "*a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garment among them and cast lots for my clothing*",

or Isaiah 53 *“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our inequities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed”*

A final farewell

Then in the last four verses of the chapter we move on to the Ascension , Now if this was the only passage in the Bible referring to the Ascension you might be forgiven for thinking it happened the very next day. But we know from the other Gospels and from Luke’s own much fuller account at the beginning of Acts, that over a month elapsed between the resurrection and Jesus’ final Ascension into heaven. And during this time he appeared on many occasions, and to over 500 people. In his Gospel, Luke isn’t trying to tell us everything, but is just trying to focus on the key message Jesus is alive! And as Luke had probably already started writing ‘the sequel’, the Acts of the Apostles...he didn’t need to go into further details here, because there was plenty of space in the next book.

The disciples transformed

As some of you may know, I’m a manager in the NHS...and managers in the NHS, well we don’t get out much! But last week I had an evening out, along with about 100 other clinicians and managers from our area. And we went somewhere I’d never been before...we went here ...does anyone recognize this? It’s the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst. It’s rather exciting to go there because you have to drive through some rather impressive gates, and have to show photo ID to be let in. And we had a very nice evening, we had a lovely dinner , and in between each of the courses we had someone talk to us about different aspects of leadership. One of the speakers was an army Major who was in charge of the ‘Centre for Army Leadership’... and he was talking to us about his experience leading a battalion on tour in Afghanistan. And one of the things he said about leadership really struck me. He said ‘leadership is about getting people from where they are, to where they need to be’ (repeat)...and that’s what Jesus was doing with the disciples on that Easter evening and over the next 40 days. He was getting them from where they were (confused, unbelieving and locked away because they were afraid of what might happen to them) to where they needed to be (confident, believing evangelists). The disciples were transformed. In verse 45 *“their minds were opened”*...they now understood from the scriptures that Jesus would die and rise again; in verse 52 *“they worshipped with great joy”*...sadness had been replaced with happiness; and in verse 53 *“they stayed continually at the temple, praising God”*. No longer were they hiding away, afraid of the Jews...but they were out there in the temple, the

Jews' most holy place, saying Jesus is alive, believe in Him, thank you God for saving us. The disciples were transformed. Jesus had taken them from where they were to where they needed to be.

Over the years many people have tried to 'dish' the evidence for the resurrection. Let's take for example this man, Ernst Renan, a nineteenth century French theologian and philosopher, he wrote: "It was a hallucination. Mary Magdalene thought she saw the Lord Jesus. And so the dream of a hallucinated woman became the hope of the church." I'm sorry, but sometime I think that people can be so open minded their brains fall out...for me the evidence for the resurrection is overwhelming...we have the witness of the disciples and at least 500 people who saw Jesus in the 40 days after the resurrection. Some of those became the first martyrs for the Christian faith...you don't do that for a hallucination; we have the authoritative words of the Old and New Testaments, we have the witness of millions of people down the generations, and of course the personal testimony of many friends here. A couple of weeks ago you may remember Gordon plugging this new book "Who do you say that I am". If you know anyone who has doubts about the historical reality of Jesus, his death and his resurrection, then I would encourage you to give them copy of this book (we have received another supply!). It simply and clearly tells the Easter story, it outlines the evidence, and also gives some examples of people today who have given their life to Jesus. People like this man Dr Francis Collins. Now here's a man not short of a brain cell or two! He was Director of the Human Genome project, that fantastic project which mapped all the genes which we have as human beings and has enabled some huge advances in medical science. He wrote this "During my boyhood years I really had no idea who Christ was. I thought of him as a myth, a fairy tale, a superhero in a 'just so' bedtime story. But as I read the actual account of his life for the first time in the four Gospels, the eyewitness nature of the narratives and the enormity of Christ's claims...I had to make a choice". He, like many other scientists over the years chose Christ. To believe in the physical reality of the resurrection doesn't require you to disengage your brain...rather it's the most rationale thing to do when you *do* engage your brain and look at the evidence!

Power to witness

So what happens next in our story v 46-49 "He told them, *"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

I always think these verses sound a bit like the start of a race. “on your marks, get ready, go”. At the start of a race you don’t just go onto the track and start running and hoping for the best. No you go up to the starting line and wait. And Jesus tells the disciples to wait. To wait in Jerusalem. The time is not yet right, because they’ve not yet received the power of the Holy Spirit. If they had tried to do things in their own strength, the disciples would have failed. A bit like Peter, he tried to be so strong for Jesus on the day that Jesus was arrested. But he couldn’t, he denied Jesus. He denied Jesus three times. Trying to witness and trying to serve God without the power of the Holy Spirit is like trying to run with your shoe laces tied together, you fall over. So the disciples had to firstly wait. And then ‘get ready’. So what happens when the starter says ‘get ready’ ...you focus all your muscles and power and strength and tense your body...it’s a time of “powering up”...and that’s what happened next for the disciples... they are powered up. But not powered up by their own human strength, they are powered up by the Holy Spirit. And only then can they ‘go’. The power is released, the runners move forward, the race has begun.

And for the disciples what was the race? The race was to preach the name of Jesus, to witness to him, firstly in Jerusalem, and then to all nations. Firstly to the Jews, and then to everyone, everywhere.

To the disciples ‘all nations’ must have sounded pretty daunting. They had only lived in a relatively small area of Judea. To go anywhere you had to walk, and walking took a long long time. And it would take generations for the message to reach all nations.

In many ways we have it so much easier today. Some of you were here a few weeks ago when our daughter Vicky was baptised. Of course it was a great day, and of course Ruth Randell was there with a camera taking photos. That evening our other daughter Rosie posted a couple of the photos on Facebook and tagged Vicky, Catherine and myself. That meant that all our friends on Facebook received a newsfeed item about Vicky’s baptism ...that over 1000 different people. And that post was “liked” by many people....including some of my work colleagues, friends of Vicky who probably didn’t know she was a Christian, and one “like” was from an old school friend of mine who now lives in New Zealand. In the space of a few hours Vicky’s witness had quite literally gone to the ends of the earth.

From invisible to invincible

So we’ve seen how in today’s passage the disciples were transformed ...transformed from a group of people who wanted to be invisible , hiding away and afraid of the Jews, to people who were out there praising God and celebrating and witnessing with joy. Empowered by

the Holy Spirit and starting in their own city of Jerusalem, they were going out to change the world and tell everyone that Jesus was alive. They had moved from wanting to be invisible, to being invincible. So as I close, what does this say to us today as a church here in Chineham . Over the past few weeks some of the members of the church have been thinking about the 'parish profile' a document which will describe to potential new ministers the essence of Christ Church Chineham and I'm sure it will show that as a Church we are very very busy, but on the spectrum of invisible to invincible, where do we fall? Many years ago, I think it was while Richard Turnbull was still with us, I had a dream. A dream about Chineham, and a dream about Christ Church...and I was reminded about that dream as I prepared for this sermon. War had broken out in Chineham. Many buildings had been destroyed, and after the fighting had died down some of us had left our homes and come down to Christ Church to see whether the Church was still standing. It wasn't. We picked our way through the ruins, rather like Coventry Cathedral in World War Two, and found that the cross was intact, it hadn't been damaged, and we lifted it up to show that although the building had been destroyed the cross had not!. Spiritually, we are living in a battlefield, the tanks of the devil are rolling up and down Reading Road, but in Christ we have the victory. In Christ, we are invincible.

As we go out from here into the cosy middle class world that we live in, let's not forget the battle. But let's also not forget the victory. At the end of Luke 24 the disciples were fired up and ready to go....ready to build that early church. Are we fired up? Are we ready to go? Are we ready to go? AMEN