

210418. Acts 3: 12-20a, Luke 24: 36b-48

[PPT1 Be my witnesses] We heard last week from John's gospel about the evening of Easter Day, and the Sunday after, and we've just heard two readings from the writings of Dr Luke- his gospel and its sequel. The gospel reading is Luke's version of events on that same Easter Sunday evening, and the reading Catherine brought us about the aftermath of a wonderful healing just weeks after Jesus had ascended back to his Father.

Ten of the 12 disciples are in a locked room with other followers of Jesus, including the two who've returned from Emmaus. The news? Jesus, risen from the dead that Sunday morning, has made a special point of meeting Peter, who had just that Thursday evening said he'd be willing to die with him, and hours later was calling down curses on himself saying he'd never met him. Then the two from Emmaus have said they've just had him in their house, having listened to him teaching them things from the Scriptures that set their hearts alight- only it never even entered their heads it could be Jesus- he'd been crucified and buried after all! No question. But then the penny dropped as he broke the bread- and he'd disappeared just like that.

And all of a sudden, despite a locked door, Jesus is there in the room with them here in Jerusalem! Aargh- a ghost! They were startled *and* frightened! Wouldn't you be?! But Jesus shows the indelible wounds of the nails. Touch them! Ghosts can't be touched. Joy, disbelief, amazement all mixed up in a whirl. Then he ate a fish! Ghosts don't eat! This is the very opposite of a ghost- this is someone so real that a door is ghostly in comparison to him. If this happened this morning among us, we'd take what this super-real person said to us and act on it!

And what does He say? In 4 phrases:
Repentance.. Forgiveness.. All nations.. You are witnesses!

Weeks later, what is that pathetic failure of a disciple Peter up to in the reading Catherine brought us? Peter had just spoken the name of Jesus the Messiah over a beggar who'd never been able to walk, a man who was a daily fixture at the Temple entrance, and lifted him to his feet, and he was walking and leaping and praising God. No wonder a crowd quickly gathered. And Peter responds to Jesus' commission on the evening of Easter day: Repent! Have your sins wiped out!

What do those words mean: what does 'repent' mean? We often take it to mean 'be sorry for what you've done'. But it much more radical than that. It means we were going this way>>> our outlook, what we did and why we did it. [PPT2 U turn sign] But now we see what we didn't see before, so we do an about-turn, we have a new outlook, a new direction. This last week, I was trying, for the nth time in this past year, to clear up my study. As usual, I was looking at a bit of paper thinking do I need this? I could scan it and store it in the computer and then throw the paper away. But then if I want to read it again, I'll print it out

again. The day ended with my study as messy as ever. Then Steph came in 'look at these boxes of old organ magazines? Will you ever look at them again? When you pop your clogs, the first thing the kids are going to do is put them in recycling'. Ah, a new perspective! I saw things in a new way. A few days later and my study is unrecognisable.

I've seen the light and I've repented!

With repentance comes **forgiveness**. [PPT3 +Debt cancelled] Another word that is often misunderstood. A radical word. We've all had the experience of being told (sombre voice) 'OK, I forgive you'. We know it means your wrongdoing has been put (as it were) in the filing cabinet, in a folder labelled 'old sins', there to be taken out and waved under your nose if you slip again. That's not forgiveness. Forgiveness is like having a debt hanging over you and the creditor knocks on your door, and holds up the account, and rips it up into shreds.

"That's it, you owe me nothing. I forgive you."

And what follows? 'Times of refreshing from the Lord! [PPT 4 +rain/bow behind] I've got a new outlook, I'm set free, I've got a new horizon in front of me, I don't have a debt round my neck. I'm forgiven! Refreshing or what?!

Incidentally, what happens next, between this Sunday's reading and next? The religious authorities and their heavy mob (-remember Matthew tells us in the final chapter of his gospel that the priests had bribed the soldiers to lie about the empty tomb-) come along and arrest Peter and John for saying Jesus is alive again. Immediate result? Another 2000 men, not counting women and children, come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah! Within weeks of the resurrection there are enough believers to cram the Royal Albert Hall to capacity!

And it won't be long before the 'All Nations' bit begins in Acts 8. [PPT 5 +world map]

Where God's people repent of old attitudes and outlooks and turn round to face a new direction. When we hear that cry of Jesus 'Father, forgive them' spoken over us, of God shredding the old stuff: my, there's refreshment! When we throw away being cowardly and distancing ourselves from Jesus so that we can just blend in with the crowd, as Peter *had* done, and being *witnesses*. [PPT6 +Jesus' hands] Well, we could see answered prayers, even healings, and the general public starting to talk about 'what's happening at St Peter & St Paul's?'

Let me just finish by quoting an extract from Natalie's email circulated in Easter week:

It'd be great if we are all thinking and praying about what God might have in store for the future. It's clear we will not be returning to exactly how things were before, and prayerful discussion and vision as we move forward are crucial. We have a unique opportunity to reshape the life of the church here in Rustington in terms of our mission, ministry and worship, and it'd be good to hear as many voices as possible as we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit together.