The Third Sunday of Easter
Preached live over Zoom to the benefice of Lydney and the villages, 2020.


Alleluia! Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

It is lovely to worship with you this morning. Thank you to David and to all of you for your invitation. I bring with me the love and prayers of your neighbours in the parish of Tidenham.

Our reading this morning is one of the most wonderful and evocative of the resurrection stories. It’s just so visual, isn’t it? Even just hearing it read aloud, we can imagine the various scenes: the two disciples walking along the lonely road. The nights drawing in, and the supper in the village, and then the rush back to Jerusalem in the dark. All of this is happening in one afternoon and evening, and all of it is happening on Easter day, in the afternoon and evening. There’s so much going on. In the cemetery don’t know. Who are these two disciples? We don’t know: they are never named. Were there other people there at the place where they had supper? What happened when they got back to Jerusalem and spread the news?

I love these Sundays after Easter day, because we hear lots of different stories about how people reacted to the amazing events of Easter. Think about the stories we have already heard over the past couple of weeks. Mary Magdalene in the garden. Peter and John, not believing Mary initially, but then poking their heads into the tomb. The 11 disciples, locked behind the doors in the house because they were so afraid, and Saint Thomas, Doubting Thomas as he is often called, poking his fingers into the holes in Jesus’s hands, and suddenly realising who he was face-to-face with.

Last week when I was preaching in Tidenham I noted that the story of doubting Thomas was very suitable for church in lockdown, because it all takes place in a locked room. Today’s story is very different. And I suppose we ought to be careful, during this rather odd time, not to try to read advice for being in social isolation into every Bible passage that we might come across. But I couldn’t help thinking, as I re-read the story today, how jealous I was of these two disciples being able to take a 14 mile walk! And I also chuckled a bit as I thought that, if they were on their state sanctioned hour of exercise, when Jesus appeared and walked beside them, the first thing they would have said to him was, “it’s very nice to see you, but would you mind keeping 2 m away please!”

There’s lots of movement in the story, and lots of physical stuff as well like the breaking of bread, which of course is also very difficult for us at the moment. But I like to just suggest three things this morning to help us to carry on being Easter people in our isolation and separation.

The first one is in verse 15 of today’s reading. We read that “while they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them.” Of course at first they don’t know who Jesus is, just like Mary Magdalen didn’t recognise Jesus in the garden on Easter day. Jesus draws near to us, even when we don’t recognise him. Perhaps especially when we don’t notice what God is doing, he draws near to us. He is alongside us, even if we don’t feel it, if we don’t recognise him, if we don’t notice. God, in his love, in his care, in his kindness, is very close indeed to us all.
And then, a few verses later in the story, Jesus asks the disciples to tell their story, and they describe how “some women of our group astounded us” with the story of the resurrection. And that just leads me to wonder how often we expect to be “astounded” by our faith? Is it possible that our faith sometimes becomes familiar, becomes predictable, even (though not, I’m sure, in the parish of Lydney), a little bit boring? When was the last time you were astounded by the story of Christ, of his resurrection, of his love, of his grace? Maybe what the extra time, or at least the change of circumstances, that this pandemic has forced upon us might give us an opportunity to be astounded once again? How about spending the next week just consciously asking God to surprise you? Maybe through reading the Bible or worshipping, maybe through talking to someone on the telephone, or via Skype or Zoom (other videoconferencing packages are available?) Maybe through the natural world in your garden, through a window, maybe somewhere quite unexpected. Are you ready to be astounded again?

And then finally, and connected to my second point, we are very used to hearing that the last part of this reading has to do with Holy Communion. That when Jesus breaks the bread, and shares it with his disciples, that’s the point at which their eyes opened and they recognise him. And of course all of that is true. It is in the breaking of bread, in our Holy Communion service, that the church understands itself to come closest to Christ. But for most of us we are separated from that at the moment. But I would want to say two things: the first is that we can always make our spiritual communion: we can join, perhaps with your vicar at the early morning service every Sunday, and meet Jesus that way. But also, we mustn’t forget what the disciples say to each other after Jesus vanishes. Because actually they don’t talk about the broken bread. They talk about the scriptures, and the words. “They said to each other, ‘were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?’” There’s another phrase, like “astounded”. Were not our hearts burning within us. When was the last time your heart burnt within you with the voice of God? That is what the Bible can do to us, and with us, sometimes. That is what prayer can do to us, and with us, sometimes. It can make our heart burn within us. Think about that excited fluttery feeling you sometimes get in your heart just before you see a long lost friend, or someone you love and have been separated from. Again, perhaps in these strange times we might sit down with our Bibles, sit down to pray, and expect to meet our long lost friend, Jesus, in the words, in the silence, in the space the prayer creates.

There’s a wonderful painting of the Supper in Emmaus by Caravaggio, an Italian painter of the 16th century, which hopefully you can now see on your screens. What I love about this painting is how amazed the two men on either side of the painting are. Look at the one on the right, throwing out his arms wide in amazement. And look at the one on the left, so astonished, his heart burning so brightly within him, that he is actually forcing himself up out of his chair in amazement.

Be amazed by our Lord today. Prepare to be amazed. Prepare to see something, hear something, meet someone, like you haven’t done for a while. Your long lost friend is waiting to walk with you again. The one who loves you is waiting to burn within you in your heart.

Live each day of the next week expecting that Christ will come and join you in your walk, even if that walk is only around your kitchen. You never know. You might just be astonished.

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