

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Third Sunday of Easter – Year A

RCL Readings – Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35.

ACNA Readings – Acts 2:14a,36-47; Psalm 116:11-16; 1 Peter 1:13-25; Luke 24:13-35.

Introduction. The season of Easter – known as Eastertide – is 50 days in length. It follows the pattern of the Jewish calendar, which has 50 days between Passover and Shavuot or Pentecost. This season's traditional greetings and response of 'He is risen!' and 'He is risen indeed!' can and should bring hope and light to our broken world. Mark Twain has been quoted as saying, 'It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand.' What is about the Easter proclamation of the resurrection that bothers Mark Twain? If the resurrection is true, then it is a truth we must all make a response to. As much as a secular world would perhaps like to, the Easter message cannot be ignored. If Jesus did not rise from the dead then no response is required. But if the resurrection is true then that changes everything!

Common Theme. The resurrection is more than an event, it's a person. Jesus says in John 11 that he IS the resurrection and life. Our readings this week detail some of the appropriate responses to the resurrection and to the lordship of Jesus. The readings reveal that the response is more than simply having the correct doctrine of the resurrection. The response is life-changing in individuals and communities. And the response requires action from us.

Acts 2:14a,36-47. After having been charged with drunken behaviour by the crowds of pilgrims who witnessed the tongues of fire and heard the disciples speaking in foreign languages, Peter now stands up in the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem to proclaim the good news of the resurrection. The core message of Peter's sermon is quite straightforward in that the resurrection is proof that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. Simply stated: if Jesus was not the Messiah then he would have remained in the tomb. The resurrection is the final Messianic proclamation by the Father who raised the Son to life, that this is indeed the Messiah.

Peter uses the prophet Joel as the Scriptural basis to explain the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Those who heard Peter are said to be *cut to the heart*. They are deeply moved and ask Peter how they should respond to the question; what should we do? They don't ask what should we believe. As they actually already believe in God, that is why they are all in Jerusalem in the first place during the festival of Pentecost. They ask what they need to do in response to the resurrection.

Peter does not reply with a well-crafted creed or doctrinal statement about the Trinity. The response is quite practical. *Repent and be baptised*; those actions are motivated by a faithful heart. The reward is forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit to each one. The community grows rapidly with three thousand people responding to the good news of Jesus the Messiah. The new community then continued to receive teaching and instruction from the apostles. Jesus had commanded his disciples – and that includes us – to make disciples and teach them to obey all that he had commanded.

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Third Sunday of Easter – Year A

Disciple in Hebrew means student. We are commanded to make students of the Word. When you study something, your education should not remain locked in your head but rather modify and change your behaviour. The faithfulness of the new community was expressed in the communal sharing of property by those who had the economic resources to do so. Faith in Jesus was clearly revealed through action, in providing for each other's physical needs. They were engaged in actively loving their neighbour.

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19. Psalm 116 is one of the six psalms known as the Egyptian Hallel – Psalms 113-118. Hallel means *to praise*. This collection of psalms was used by the Jewish people when celebrating the pilgrim festivals of Passover, Shavuot/Pentecost, and Sukkot. After the destruction of the second Temple, they were incorporated into the liturgy of the Passover Seder, the HaGaddah.

This psalm describes an appropriate response to the Lord for all his goodness. The Lord heard the cry of the psalmist and acted on his behalf, reflecting the Lord hearing the ancient Israelite cry for deliverance in Egypt and acting redemptively. Verse 12 is a rhetorical question; what can I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me? The answer is both an obvious nothing, as we are but mortal creatures before the Lord who owns everything so what could you possibly give God?

And at the same time, we obviously have to do something. The psalmist vows to *take up the cup of salvation*, which in the Passover Seder is also known as the cup of blessing. His response is to bless the Lord and in loyalty to the one God call upon his name and no other. In Jewish tradition, you always bless the Lord as a way of saying thank you for the things God has done or given you. If you don't say thank you when God gives you something then in Jewish tradition you are a thief!

As well as blessing the Lord the psalmist promises to fulfil his oaths to the Lord. A common vow made daily before the Lord was the saying of the Sh'ma – an oath of loyalty from Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Believing that there was only one God was not the end of the story, the psalmist will also give further practical responses to the goodness of God; he will bring sacrifices of thank offerings to the Lord. All this will be done in public so that others will be able to see and acknowledge the active faith of the psalmist.

While the psalm celebrates deliverance from death (v. 8) the psalmist also acknowledges that death is still a reality for the people of God. When that day does arrive for death to take the saints, the Lord is there and holds their deaths as something precious and not something to be overlooked.

1 Peter 1:13-25. Living the way God wants us to live is not works of righteousness; it is obedience. So often those two words are mistakenly confused with each other. The problem is that from a practical standpoint, they often do look the same in practice. Peter – the great leader of the first apostles – clearly charges us to be obedient children in a call to holiness. Our response to the calling of God, which is

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Third Sunday of Easter – Year A

through the resurrection of Jesus, is to be holy as he is holy. This is a direct quote from Leviticus, which in my opinion is the best book of the Bible.

Genesis informs us that God is the creator and author of all things, Exodus reveals him to be a redeemer and lawgiver, but only Leviticus identifies him as holy. The command to be holy as the Lord is holy occurs six times in Leviticus. And as we see from the Epistle, remains a command for the people of God in the New Testament. Holiness is an action that is motivated by faith and a willing desire to be faithful. Holiness is more than simply moral purity, although it is that too.

Holiness is a set-apartness that engages with every aspect of our lives. We are urged to break from the lifestyle of this world, which for Peter is characterized by lust and ignorance. Being counter-cultural does not mean we disappear from society into self-imposed isolation. Instead, we reflect the holiness of God back to the world through our sincere love for each other and our love of life with hope. The resurrection of Jesus is the final manifestation of the love that God has for his world. This is the good news preached through Peter and continues to be preached through us. This word endures forever!

Luke 24:13-35. The Gospel of Luke gives us a unique post-resurrection encounter between two semi-anonymous disciples and Jesus, one is identified by the name of Cleopas and the other remains unnamed. We do not know much about these disciples. From the gospel accounts we understand that Jesus had more followers than the inner 12 apostles. The story of the sending of the 70 – or 72 – disciples 2 by 2 is proof of that. Cleopas and his friend were probably returning from Jerusalem after the Passover and may have even been present at the Last Supper.

Initially, the two disciples fail to recognize the traveller walking the road and talking with them. Commentators try and give all kinds of reasons and explanations for their inattentiveness and failure to know their Master. After all, they are not unfamiliar with the followers of Jesus. In verse 22, they cite that *some of their women* went to the tomb and reported angelic visions and a missing body. And again in verse 24, Peter and the other disciple who went to the tomb are spoken of as *some of our companions*. This would indicate that they are not strangers to the small Jesus community and know the followers of Jesus personally.

They confess to Jesus that they had hoped that, Jesus of Nazareth was going to be the one to redeem Israel but the crucifixion seemed to have squashed that hope. Jesus chides them as *foolish* for being slow to understand the prophetic Scriptures regarding the Messiah. Although it is important to note that the many messianic predictions in the Bible were very often cryptic allusions to an almost hidden mysterious figure, and certainly far from clearly spelt out as we have them available to us today.

I confess to being frustrated by Luke here as he preceded to tell us how Jesus reveals himself throughout the Scriptures and yet shares none of that dialogue with us. The mystery continues as the disciples

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Third Sunday of Easter – Year A

realize who Jesus is at the moment of table fellowship and the breaking of bread. This moment serves as the basis for the line in the modern liturgical Eucharist Prayer, where we beseech the Lord to make himself known in the breaking of bread. Even more mysterious, is the sudden disappearance of Jesus immediately from the table.

The gospels in their entirety suggest that the resurrection of Jesus was indeed a very real bodily resurrection. The tomb is empty so something happened to the body that went in there. Luke's own gospel (24:39) has Jesus himself claim to have flesh and bone and not be a spirit. However, the resurrected body of Jesus – the same one that went into the tomb is the same one that came out – does have some unique qualities. His ability to appear in locked rooms and then translocate, at the same time eat food, and have obvious bodily scar tissue indicate that the tension between a physical and resurrected body is not resolved. It is a gnostic idea that says that Jesus does not have a physical body and Gnosticism has no place in the theology of the Church.

The response of the disciples to the revelation of the resurrection is to return to Jerusalem and witness to the fact. This should also be our response. Does the truth of the resurrection stir in us a passion to witness that fact to the world? This is the challenge and the invitation of the good news. The witness of the resurrection demands our response.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.