



Sermon preached by Revd Elizabeth Caswell on 14th April 2024

Readings: *Luke 24: 36b-48; Acts 3: 12-19; 1 John 3: 1-7*

Easter III

After the heady and exciting readings of the last two Sundays, today's lectionary passages may seem a bit disappointing. They are also a bit frustrating. The Gospel and the reading from Acts both assume that the reader or listener knows what has just happened – “While they were talking about this” (about what?); or, in Acts 3, “Why do you wonder at this?” (at what?). The irritation with the Acts passage is underlined by the fact that it ends with a comma! The Luke passage ends in the middle of a paragraph, lest we should anticipate the message of Pentecost

Perhaps you can see now why today's readings tipped me in the direction of punctuation¹. But I suppose we are all tempted to edit the Good News, to throw the emphasis on what matters more to us right now, and keep quiet about the things that might lead to a question mark.

These weeks between Easter and Pentecost find the disciples confronted with a new relationship with Jesus, and on their way to get another, when He will no longer suddenly walk through a door or join them for supper, and yet will be, amazingly, present everywhere and all the time, when the Spirit comes.

Our readings are about people accommodating change; moving on from the most emphatic full stop – death – to the most extra ordinary, baffling, exuberant exclamation mark - Resurrection! And then to be asked to live through the whole gamut of spiritual grammar as they live in perpetual change: seeing Jesus' words coming true; becoming the actor on the stage themselves; becoming witnesses who not only have seen and heard and touched, but who now bear witness in words, actions and in the creation of a community which is a new family, children of God.

It is a truism to say that the Christian life is a journey; but it's a useful image. Those first disciples were travelling spiritually and, of course, often literally, into new territory. Jesus had said that they would do what he had done – and they did. The man at the Gate Beautiful had believed in the name of Jesus and had stood up and walked. That is what had drawn the crowds to Peter and John in Acts 3, and provoked the sermon of which we heard the first part, and which led to Peter and John's arrest. Another part of the journey ... to suffer, perhaps to die.

Easter is unstoppable. On Thursday (oh, what a day that was ...) I managed to remove the seal on the top of a new bottle of ketchup. Unfortunately, prior to that I had shaken the bottle, thinking it had already been opened – and a fountain of ketchup siphoned out of the bottle and all over me, the floor, the skirting board... you get the picture. Unstoppable. And that was just ketchup – imagine what Resurrection can do! Well, you don't have to imagine because you know. And the reality of it continues because of verse 49: “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised...” But we ended at verse 48! It's always wise to push on to the end of the paragraph.

Now, dear friends, you may well be getting bored with all this harping on about punctuation marks and paragraphs, especially as what we have is a translation. But bear with me. We all have to live, as those first disciples did, with the constant drama of serving the Resurrected One in the power of the Spirit. Our lives are punctuated also by all the normal transitions of human existence: the birth, the growing up, the first day at school, the broken bones, the broken hearts; the growing old – and of course, death.

¹ We had discussed the meanings and significance of different punctuation marks – including commas, full-stops, question marks, exclamation marks - in the 'Sharing Together' time earlier in the service.

Held within the love of God, bearing witness to the life-transforming love of God made known in Jesus, crucified and risen, we find ourselves at school with the divine Teacher. And sometimes we need to recognise a full stop for what it is: life will not be the same again; we do have to change direction; we can let go of destructive behaviour; we can be forgiven and forgive. Or, in Paul's language, we can "die to sin and live to righteousness". We can as families, as nations even, choose to put a stop to retaliation – break the cycle of revenge. Full stop.

But don't be surprised if the Holy Spirit, our God-sent Teacher, then reveals to us a comma ... or perhaps even a colon, a whole list of new possibilities opening up, and new risks to take for the sake of this amazing grace which has birthed us and nourished and reared us, and is guiding us through this journey which began at a cross and an empty tomb and ends – if ends is the right word – when we see him as he is. Double exclamation mark!! Kingdom come.

Liz Caswell
14th April 2024