

*opening minds*  
a sermon preached on the  
*third sunday of easter*  
15 April 2018  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by father ken hewlett*

the lections: Acts 3:12-20; Psalm 118; 1 John 2:15-17, 3: 1-16; Luke 24:36b-48

In our family collections of photographs that most of us have, there usually exists photographs, that are formal, those that were taken as we relaxed or celebrated, and those that were taken when we were not aware that any photograph was been taken. In each category we are able to see ourselves and others are able to see us in a wide variety of portraits, in a wide variety of situations and moods.

The gospel reading for today is somewhat similar. There are many portraits of the risen Christ spread through the four gospels, all of them different, and this year our attention is focused mainly on Jesus' resurrection appearances in John. But today, uniquely we are offered a picture by Luke – Luke who records the empty tomb and a vision of angelic visitors talking to perplexed disciples, similar to the other gospels, but it is Luke alone who records the story of the Road to Emmaus. In fact we join the great story telling physician just after the events on the way to Emmaus. During that story faith in the risen Jesus had been kindled as the hearts of Cleopas and his companion were 'set on fire' by their unrecognised guest who opened to them the scriptures (Luke 24:32).

But why, then, do we have this sequel to Emmaus – a story which is not quite a footnote, but which seems almost to detract from the eucharistically phrased climax: 'then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread' (Luke 24:35)? The answer might lie in Jesus' resurrection identity: in the Emmaus story Jesus' corporeal presence is suggested, but in the sequel it is made explicit. At the house in Emmaus Jesus breaks bread, but does not eat; this time he both asks for food, takes it and eats it before their very eyes, reinforcing his invitation: 'handle me, and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have' (Luke 24:40).

It appears that Luke has two aims in mind. Firstly, to emphasise that the risen Christ is not a disembodied spirit, nor, perhaps, even a spiritual person set free from his human body. Secondly, he has an apologetic axe to grind to make clear that Jesus' sufferings and resurrection, plus the church's call to evangelise, are all revealed in the scriptures of the synagogue: 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness off sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem' (Luke 24:46). I think that we need to look at Luke's aims a little more closely.

In the telling of the story of the discovery of the empty tomb, Luke has a group of women from Galilee, some of whom are named, such as Mary Magdalene and Joanna, being frightened by dazzling messengers. These men (Luke 24:4) help them remember words uttered by Jesus before he died which included reference to his rising again. This they retold 'to the eleven and to all the rest' (Luke 24:9), although the apostolic response was decidedly woolly (Luke 24:11). Then Luke immediately goes on to recount the journey to Emmaus; 'That very day two of them were going to a village....' (Luke 24:13). He thus seems to link the earlier episode to this one by referring to the main characters [Cleopas and his companion] as 'two of them' – i.e. two from 'the eleven and the rest'. And in the portion of the gospel we heard for today, those two disciples have returned to Jerusalem and 'found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them (Luke 24:33).

Almost as an aside Luke puts an oblique reference to another manifestation of Jesus, to Simon, without giving any details (Luke 24:35). So all these stories are about the same group of people. They meet with the risen Jesus, fail to recognise him, and when they meet with him again they still fail to receive him! So what is the nature of Jesus identity?

Luke implies that, were it not for divine intervention, the two disciples journeying to Emmaus would have realised who their companion was – but their ‘eyes were kept from recognising him’ (Luke 24:16). They only recognise him when their minds have been enlightened through his handling of the scriptures. He then physically takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them (Luke 24:30). Whatever the reason, at this point their minds were jolted into reality. The identity of Jesus, in the sense of his appearance, therefore seems to be much the same as it was before; only divine intervention prevented him from being recognised.

In the following episode, where Jesus now stands before them all (Luke 24:36), we might expect the eleven – or at least Simon and the two who had been to Emmaus – to recognise him instantly. Here there is no idea of divine obscuring; in a sense they did recognise their sudden visitor, but they ‘were startled and frightened, and supposed they saw a spirit’ (Luke 24:37). They supposed it wasn’t really him. In the invitation to examine his hands and his feet – implying to view the nail prints – and to handle him, the disciples were being invited to establish fully the physical properties of Jesus’ risen body. And the handling and the eating of the piece of fish seemed to put their hearts at rest (Luke 24:41ff). The identity of Jesus is thus ‘fleshed out’ – excuse the pun – so that Luke shows that it wasn’t only that the risen Jesus looked the same as before he died, but he was physically the same. Now Jesus opens their minds to understand the scriptures (Luke 24:45).

Luke is keen, then, to persuade his listeners that Jesus had to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. This was part of his identity as the Christ, not events incidental to his calling, and this brings us to Luke’s second aim. Yet what scriptures Jesus used to justify his suffering and triumph as the Messiah are quite unclear – indeed, it feels as if ‘we are kept from recognising them’. Cross reference Bibles make valiant attempts to find the sacred texts, but they are nearly all obscure and often do not seem to be in tune with the words as they were originally spoken or written.

It seems in this collection of portrayals of the risen Jesus we are given many angles, even from Luke. But the glimpses/pictures we would really like to have – say, of the texts used by Jesus, as well as the invited guests – are missing from the album. We remain witnesses by faith of events we do not wholly understand.

Lord, you are the giver of faith and understand the complexities of the doubting mind, come to us in the grace of our risen Lord Jesus. With his help enable us to doubt all our own doubts with the same stringency that we bring to the blind credulity and superstition of others. Amen