

# *transformation*

a sermon preached on the  
*second sunday of easter*

23 April 2017

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 118; 1 Peter 1:1-12; John 20:19-31

What a difference a week makes! Just over a week ago, on Good Friday, we were sitting with the spectre of the crucified body of Jesus on the cross at Golgotha. Largely deserted, only the three Marys, Jesus' Aunt, and the beloved disciple have remained in faith - no-one else bar a soldier or two is there. Jesus hangs, abandoned by the thousands he fed, the hundreds he healed, by the however many who cheered him into Jerusalem in his last week and, of course the twelve. He has been abandoned especially by Peter who saw the Messiah in the man and declared he would never leave.

At the first sign of the end, they disappeared, vanished. All promises of faith, all pledges of allegiance and love were rendered worthless. In an instant, it seems the work of three years is lost, the potential for social revolution in a society of patriarchy, inequality and oppression teeters on a knife edge and the church may yet be stillborn.

But something strange happened. On the third day Mary Magdalene sees that the tomb is empty and calls the disciples - although at these point they do not deserve that name - and Peter and one other come running. In an instant these men are converted, perhaps for the first time. We might call it 'an ah ha moment' an inflection in time when the balance shifts and what seemed to have been a doomed project, a fanciful idea built on promises of triumph, but radically misunderstood, now becomes clear.

And the clarity is that triumph, which was expected in traditional terms of a messianic victory where the strong gloriously overcome the weak is actually the opposite - the weak have overcome the strong in a manner that, while it totally defies human rationality, makes complete sense of the life of Jesus, his time with his followers over three years, and his death.

The transformation of defeat and failure into belief has taken place in the disciples' hearts.

As we read this morning, then the Easter revolution begins to be cemented into place by Jesus' appearances to the disciples and again to Thomas the rationalist in an encounter where human dynamism in that it contains is displaced by a power that is not subject to this world's laws and limitations. Jesus' followers have seen a vision of the divine and in a short space had their doubt and dismay reversed to belief and joy.

Therefore Peter is able to stand with renewed confidence before the crowd. Gone are the denials of Jesus, Peter is a new man, able to stand among the people to make his proclamation without fear. It is a truly miraculous change in him.

Our reading this morning from Acts picks up Peter's speech part way through. He has already in the previous few verses, quoted from the prophet Joel to connect Jesus life, death and resurrection with the Hebrew scriptures. He then goes on to make an account of it in terms of God's intentional acting in the world:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

The transformed Peter now builds an argument for the continuity of Judaism and what is in the process of become Christianity - essentially a political act of public theology. Moreover, he quotes from Psalm 16 to link David to Jesus in the royal line of Kings. Peter proclaims his confidence - a confidence that failed him a few short days before.

In his letter Peter, or someone attributed as Peter, summarises his renewed understanding. It is first and foremost a result of his apprehension of Jesus' resurrection. He says: 'By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ... an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.'

He reasserts his confidence and his certainty. But he also admits that this certainty comes out of doubt and weakness of faith, and that he, like us was tested in that faith and sometimes found wanting. He acknowledges that his audience has not seen what he has seen - the reality of the risen Christ, and that faith for them, like us has a further dimension of doubt.

So, the church almost failed at the last moment, sunk in doubt, its leader no longer visible and the people scattered. Certainty had become doubt, confidence had become fear, the divine argument that connected the Word made flesh to the salvation history of Israel, in particular the royal line of David becomes a joke. But in an instant it is recovered in the resurrection.

The question I believe we, the church, must ask ourselves is how are we transformed by the resurrection? Today on what some people call 'Low Sunday' do we say 'well that's Easter done for another year, time to plan a winter holiday somewhere warm or back to work after a few nice days off' or are we transformed for service and mission, revitalised, resurrected to do out there what we profess in here? I mean no disrespect but I do want to challenge us to ask how the crucified and risen Christ changes our lives. If the resurrection leaves us unchanged - what purpose has it served, or, more to the point, what service have we rendered to it?