

Easter 2
19/4/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 4:32 - 35
Psalm 118
1 John 1:1 – 2:2
John 20:19 – 31

Sermon preached by Rev. Peter Blackwood

Thank God someone was prepared to say they didn't believe that Jesus was alive. Thomas is a representative of so many of us. Thank God someone was game to tell us about Thomas. John the evangelist faced up to the problem of doubt in the church. The story of the resurrection of Jesus raises difficulties, not only for our scientific age, but for all generations that have heard this extremely improbable story.

It must have been an issue in John's church. What are the practical implications for the story the disciples told. Let me suggest just a few. If Jesus, who was crucified, were alive again was he in his old earthly body resuscitated? If he was in a different body what ever became of the old one? What ever became of the new one if we can't see it anymore? Given these problems how might the events be understood? There have been a number of possibilities offered. Most of these are very old, though there are some newer reworkings of some old themes.

The predominant version through the ages of the church is that the tomb was empty on the Sunday morning and that Jesus was alive in bodily form, visible and able to do what human bodies do, like eating and showing evidence of past injuries. Some differences were evident, however. He appeared in locked rooms and eventually stopped appearing in physical form.

One idea is that we are dealing with story or myth. After the crucifixion the disciples of Jesus discovered that their master was still with them, in their memories, if you like, but in such a way that he continued to influence their thinking and acting – that what he had been doing could be carried out by them as if he were still active in his earthly ministry. The story gave light and sound to what was otherwise difficult to talk about.

Another theory is that Jesus didn't really die. There are a couple of variations on this theme – one that someone else was substituted for Jesus at the last minute just before the hanging, another that he didn't really die and recovered in the cool of the tomb after the burial. This idea was recently advocated by a Sydney scholar, Barbara Thiering. She thinks that Jesus ended up in the community at Qumran (where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found) and ran the church operations from there. The ABC Compass program last Sunday night raised some of these questions too. Their list of possibilities included the story that Jesus survived the crucifixion and he went to live in the south of France.

The gospel writers were grappling with all those same issues and questions in their churches that we find in our churches. The questions are still here – I know, I ask them myself and I get asked them by other people.

John sets out to deal with these issues. I don't think the texts satisfy all the questions. He satisfies different people in different ways but he says 'no' to some ideas that people have posed. He says 'no' to the idea that Jesus only seemed to die. It was an idea that was gaining ground in the early church and the gospel writers were clear on this point. However else you may want to understand the resurrection, understand this, that Jesus was crucified and he died. They are also very clear that on the Sunday the disciples discovered him to be alive again. The third thing they are clear about is that these two facts put together stretch the understanding of human minds.

In his story about Thomas, John was very likely taking hold of what was actually going on in his church. People were doubting, they were wanting proof, they wanted seeing and touching evidence. He was telling his church that Jesus had died and was risen again, and people said, 'How can we believe that? It has never happened before, we can't see with our eyes that he is alive again. If we could see we would believe.' In the story of Thomas all those people are represented, all the doubting ones, and he is the one who, when he sees Jesus, exclaims, 'My Lord and my God!' He has believed with a vengeance. He has made the classic statement of faith. All he had asked was to have proof that Jesus was alive, not that he was the saviour of the world. He asked for one thing and got both. How come?

Something different has happened here. Thomas has started out as the one who will do the acting. When he sees and touches he will have grounds for believing. Remember that John is telling this to people, like you and me, who cannot see and touch the risen Lord. When Thomas sees he does not need to touch because he has come to a realisation of what neither seeing or touching could prove. He has come to a realisation that he hasn't been active in. Thomas has been given a new revelation.

In the first instance faith is a gift of God not a human accomplishment. It is a gift to the first disciples who saw and touched and to those who follow who cannot see and touch Jesus in the first flush of his new life because we are not allowed the same proof events. Faith is a gift.

Now, is all this skirting away from how Jesus appeared to those apostles? What is John and the other gospel writers saying about Jesus' appearances? They are clear that the grave was empty. They are clear that Jesus was present among them. What is less certain is the nature of that presence, that body that they saw. They are variously wanting to say that it was not a ghost, that he ate and could be touched, but also that he could appear among them without needing the door and that he could be unrecognisable until some familiar action reveals who he is.

How then can I understand this presence of Jesus? How does John help me with this most perplexing mystery? In coming to what ever conclusions I can about all this I have to acknowledge my gratitude to John for being adamant that the same Jesus who died is the Jesus who is alive and that he was present to the apostles in a tangible way. (I confess I am not able to put my finger on what tangible means when speaking of Jesus' appearance.) Secondly, I have to acknowledge my gratitude to Thomas for giving me permission to doubt, to be sceptical, to question, to be allowed to bring my rational senses to the business of religious belief. Thirdly I have to acknowledge my gratitude to God for the gift of faith that enables me to look upon Jesus and say, 'my Lord and my God.'

All this is given me in the church. It is in the church among other believing and doubting Christians that I discover Jesus alive. It is in the church with all its complicated structures, its petty disputes, its incompetence, its scandals, with all its signs of antichrist, nevertheless the Spirit of Jesus who taught love and forgiveness in the face of hate and vengeance, who touched the contaminated with compassion, who gave sight and insight and life, and who did this on a backdrop of complicated structures, petty disputes, incompetence and scandal.

The living light of Christ blazes precisely because he is set on a dark canvass. The resurrected life of Christ is set right up against the crucified death of Jesus. For me it works like art. In order for the artist to depict a bright image there must be dark shadow. Look again at the art around us and see, particularly in the art depicting sunlight, just how much and how dark the shadow is. Without shadow, the eye cannot perceive that the sun is shining. We await a day when the light of Christ will be perfectly perceived in a place where our perceptions will not need shadow or death.
