

Easter 2
11/4/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 4:32-35
Psalm 133
John 20:19-31

Don't be dead

Imagine that tomorrow morning's news bulletins reported six new locally-acquired COVID-19 infections in Melbourne today; and that then, on Tuesday, there were ten more; and, on Wednesday, another 25. This being the case, we would be right to guess that next week's worship service would be pre-recorded and that we would need to re-stock our mask supply!

In a way which, 18 months ago, would have been unimaginable to all except infectious disease epidemiologists, we all now know the signs of an approaching community lockdown. Rising infections from unidentified sources mean a tight constraining of community movement: if *this* – rising infections – then *that* – isolation.

Yet, if tomorrow we read a well-corroborated report of the return to life of a person previously quite dead, it would have almost no meaning for us whatsoever, in the sense that almost nothing would change in our going about our daily routines. Our contemporary thinking is that the dead *can't* rise. This means that, even if we are wrong about this, we have no framework for understanding what 'risen' might mean. If the resuscitation of a well-dead person could be established, it would quite simply be *meaningless*. By this I mean that talk of a resurrection would have no *application* for us: it would not signal *what we should do next*.

In Jesus' time, this was not the case. While our way of thinking about ourselves and our world is such that the dead don't rise because they *can't*, many of his generation held also that the dead don't rise, but that they *can*. This difference is what makes the New Testament proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus at least *possible*: the dead *can* rise – or *God can raise* them, even if God usually *doesn't* do so. And, of course, the New Testament declares: now one *has been* raised.

But there is more to resurrection than this in the New Testament. The notion of resurrection was an element of apocalyptic thought. This arrived late in Jewish thinking and was attractive because of the kinds of problems we have recently seen developed in Job (and also in Ecclesiastes and the Psalms): the world as it stands is unjust, and it seems that God must also, then, be unjust. 'Apocalyptic' concerned itself with the 'apocalypse' – literally, the 'revelation' of what has been hidden (Greek: *apo* [from/out of], *kalypto* [hide]). What will be brought out from hiding is the righteousness of God: God's inherent righteousness in God's *setting* right what is wrong. God will judge the world, and reveal righteousness in the process. Resurrection matters here because the judgement is of the totality of history, including those who have already died, and we cannot *hear* the judgement of God if we are dead.

This *judgement* – the revealing of where righteousness resides – is the heart of the matter, and not the rising. This is to say that 'resurrection' – often thought by us to be the central notion – is a *subordinate* idea in apocalyptic thinking. Resurrection is like the money we need to have in our pocket in order to buy our lunch. The money is not the point – the lunch is.

To say, then, that a person has been raised from the dead, is to say that this process has begun: the *end of the world* has begun, with ‘end’ now meaning not termination but *completion, goal, final purpose*. God is about to do what needs to be done to set things right – to set *us* right, to set the world in the way it should be.

If this is what we expect – as first-century Palestinian Jews – what are we to do if a resurrection signals that the judgement is imminent? We are to turn from what is not right to what *is* right.

And this brings us to the potentially terrifying passage we have heard from Acts this morning. We read to this point of the unfolding ramifications of Jesus’ resurrection and the gift of the Spirit that thousands of people have believed the preaching of the apostles. And now we hear, ‘for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need’ (4. 34f).

Of course, this will likely only be terrifying for those who have lands or houses, and if the implication of Luke’s telling us this is that we should do the same, even now. We have already decided this latter is not the case if we have heard this passage before and not done as they did! (And that we need not do so is suggested in the story which immediately follows – the death of Ananias and Sapphira, not for failing to sell their property [they did sell it] but for lying to the community about the proceeds).

In fact, in view of other aspects of the New Testament witness (later, for example, Paul plans to take up a collection among the Gentile churches for the poor Jerusalem believers), we might conclude that the sale of these assets is a naïve and harmful response to the resurrection, assuming that they did as the text tells. But we must be careful here. We are not the judges of these first believers, least of all if we judge them as an act of self-defence.

As we have just outlined, their belief in the resurrection of Jesus entailed also a conviction that the final resolution of the tensions of history was imminent. In their selling and sharing, a belief about the true nature of the world, now about to be revealed, takes concrete and specific shape here and now: ‘there [will not be] a needy person among them’. They ‘believe’ by ‘acting’. As the apostles have been testifying with great power, so also do these new believers also testify to their conviction with great power: with economic and social action which reflects the promise in the apostles’ preaching.

It might seem that it was easier for them to let go of their things because they expected not to be needing them much longer; this was indeed likely part of their thinking, and was still in Paul’s mind 25 years later (see his teaching on marriage, ‘in view of the impending crisis’, 1 Corinthians 7). Yet, it was not so much easier as *clearer* to them how to testify to the resurrection and the impending judgement it signalled. There being no tomorrow changes our sense of what matters for today, and we *declare* that there will be no tomorrow by *acting* like it is the case.

But what does resurrection faith look like for us, who have every confidence that tomorrow will come? A general policy of selling, dispersing and casting ourselves onto the generosity of others looks like irresponsibility.

About this, three things...

The first thing is that our resurrection faith – like theirs in Acts – will ‘look like’ *something*. Faith in this God takes a recognisable, lived shape in this world. The believed word only makes sense when it is reflected in a life which corresponds to what is believed. If our beliefs do not make sense to us, it is likely because our actions don’t resonate with them. That we are forgiven will only ‘feel’ true to the extent that we live like forgiven people, and forgive others. Resurrection-talk only makes sense when the power of death in its many forms is seen to be pressed back in our lives and relationships.

The second thing is that our resurrection faith – like theirs in Acts – will ultimately be seen to have taken the ‘*wrong*’ shape. There is no pre-determined set of self-evidently righteous actions for expressing Christian belief or, if there is, we can’t know what it is. What is justified is so from God, and not because we got the formula right. It was once the *right* thing to do, to sell possessions and share the proceeds. It was once the *right* thing to do, to build 900-seater churches with towers. These were appropriate forms for the expression of a resurrection faith – and indeed may be again in the life of any individual or community.

The third thing is that God nevertheless looks to us to see what shape our resurrection faith – like theirs in Acts – will take. If we cannot know beforehand what we ‘should’ do, then God cannot know either. If there is any requirement God has, it is only that God’s people not look like they are dead. To us, in age and in youth, in health and infirmity, in darker times and lighter, when alone or in company, God commands: Don’t look dead.

To the church as a whole, confronted by wide-ranging changes and challenges around its place in the community, Don’t look dead.

To us as a congregation, anticipating a differently shaped future, *Don’t look dead*.

How we act – how we *appear* to ourselves and to others – is what we believe ourselves to be and testifies to what we think will come of us. The gospel is that Jesus is risen, and that we are being raised with him. This will only make sense if we don’t look dead, if we – and others – see in us that the worst of death is behind us and that before us is only deeper, richer life.

To recite the creed of the church, with its central theme of creation out of nothing, of life out of death, is to declare ourselves equipped and ready for the task of living and enlivening.

Let us, then, receive this life, live it, and give it.
