

Welwyn Team Ministry – Reflections for Easter Week – The Resurrection Appearances

Monday – John 20:14-18

¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The gospels vary slightly in their recording of who went to the tomb on that first Easter morning. But there are two factors in common. That they were women (with the exception of Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John, who see only the empty tomb) and that Mary Magdalene was amongst them.

Much ink has been spilt over the person of Mary Magdalene. Notoriously in 591 Gregory the Great erroneously identified her with the ‘sinful woman’ of Luke 7:36f. It was indeed true that the Galilean town of Magdala had a ‘dodgy’ reputation, and that in the next verses Luke introduces Mary as one ‘from whom seven demons had gone out.’ Speculation was fuelled by the discovery in 1896 of partial texts of a lost Coptic ‘Gospel of Mary’, dating from the mid second century in which Peter is incensed by Jesus supposedly saying that he valued Mary above his other disciples. Incidentally no ancient text ever suggests that Mary was a lover or wife of Jesus.

However, the gospels only ever introduce her briefly as a companion of Jesus in Luke 8, prior to her appearance at the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus. We need no further back story. She is a woman healed, she is a follower of Jesus all the way to death and burial, she is the first witness of the resurrection. That is enough for her to be remembered throughout history. We all have back stories, questionable or glorious pasts, questions about identity. On Easter day we remember that these ultimately do not matter, for we are called by name, ‘in Christ we are all a new creation.’ (2 Cor 5:17)

‘Do not touch me’ – Titian



Tuesday - The Road to Emmaus - Luke 24:13-35

An extract from the text:

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'

The obvious question to ask of this famous passage is 'why did these disciples not recognise Jesus walking on the road?' They were not of the twelve (and therefore when it comes to the breaking of the bread which forms the climax of the story, would not have been present at the Last Supper) yet they knew the inner circle well – an inner circle who were devastated by the loss of their Lord and Master.

There are two obvious reasons. Firstly these were sane rational people who, like us, knew that dead people did not walk along roads. Secondly, on a hot dusty road one would be well wrapped up against the elements, probably including shielding the face. However the reason Luke gives is (v16) that God intervened to prevent them.

Yet whilst it was perhaps not Luke's intention, the verb 'recognise' in English can be used in another way. For instance people do not 'recognise' me as the greatest cyclist or male model of my generation (but they will obviously with hindsight). A better classicist than me will tell me if the Greek verb used by Luke '*epegnosan*' can have that sense.

But the verb does have its roots in the word 'know', and certainly as the story unfolds so the truth about Jesus is slowly revealed. And just like in our Sunday morning Parish Eucharist there are two basic parts: the opening of the Scriptures and decisively, the Breaking of the Bread.

The present restrictions on how we worship have given to many an insight into the way technology can be used – virtual worship, prayer, meetings and teaching abound – often in brilliantly creative ways. However I do think we need to recognise that this is still second best, or to use the technical term 'impaired.' We cannot live the fullness of Christian community until we meet again around the same physical table, open the Scriptures together and share the Breaking of the Bread. Until then we are in a kind of Babylonian exile – we make the most of it, and keep the faith, but we also long for return.

'Supper at Emmaus' - Caravaggio



Wednesday – John’s Pentecost – John 20:19-23

An extract from the text:

Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.

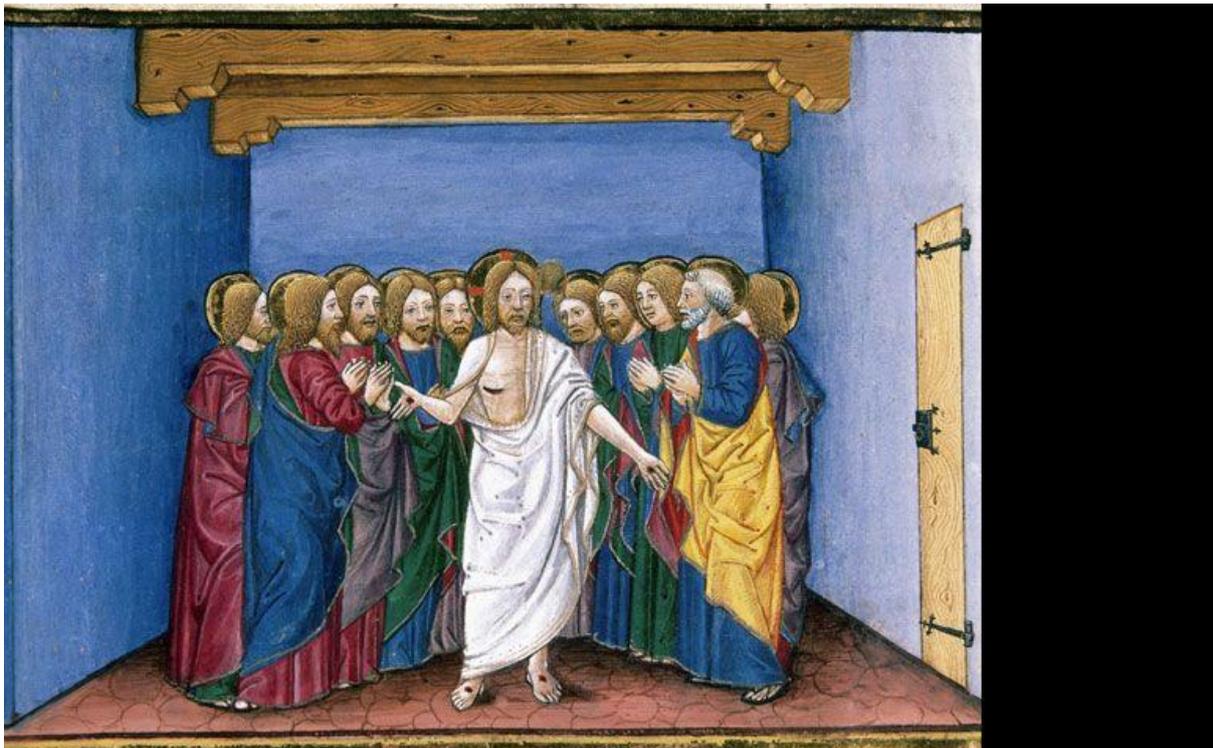
In school assemblies I sometimes like to try my hand at some cross-curriculum teaching, most of all mathematics. I often do this through the church’s year: Jesus is presented in the Temple aged 40 days, so Candlemas falls on? 40 days of Lent (add in Sundays or Holy Week) leads up to Easter, another 40 days and Jesus ascends, the disciples wait in prayer for another 10 days, meaning Pentecost is on? You can throw in a bit of human biology as well: Christmas day is on 25th December, so why are we thinking about the angel today (25th March: Annunciation)? ... and my favourite question for adults – why does the tax year end on April 5th (answers by email or post please)?

But of course all this goes wrong if you follow John’s Gospel, for here the gift of the Spirit is not given 10 days after the Ascension but on the evening of Easter day. Jesus breathes on them and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit. The word for Spirit being the same in Greek as that for breath or wind – *pneuma* from which we get words like ‘pneumatic’. Another bit of cross curriculum action, and a headache for bible translators.

Here Jesus also offers his ‘peace’ – something he will also offer to Thomas tomorrow, Thomas being absent this evening. This corresponds with the promises which Jesus has made in John’s account of the Last Supper – he will give them his peace (14:27 & 16:32) and promises the Paraclete (Spirit – several times in chapters 14, 15 & 16).

And what a promise to us in these times! Peace and the Spirit of God. May these be your gifts today. What better things could we receive?

‘The Risen Jesus appears to his disciples’ – 15th Century Italian painting



Thursday – ‘Doubting’ Thomas – John 20:24-29

From v26:

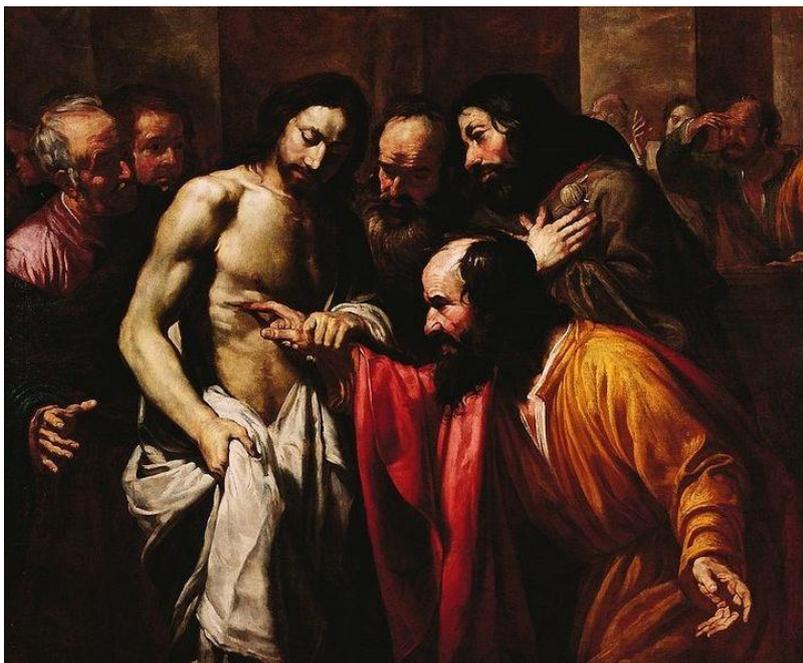
A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’²⁸ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’²⁹ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

If we play a biblical word association game and I say Thomas, many of us will come up with the answer ‘doubting.’ This is rather unfair to Thomas, and the word does not occur in this passage. Indeed Thomas here is granted here only what we have been told was granted to the other disciples a week previously. Not only can we then accuse them of sexism (Luke 24:11: they dismiss the women’s witness as an ‘idle tale’) but also of the extraordinary lingering doubt even when Jesus is standing in front of them on the mountain at the close of Matthew’s gospel (Matt 28:17 – wait for Saturday!).

Indeed on the other occasions Thomas is mentioned in John’s gospel we might call him ‘Brave’ Thomas (‘Let us go and die with him’ 11:16) or Thomas of the Intelligent Question (‘How can we know the way?’ 14:5).

Not only that, but in this passage John puts into Thomas’ mouth the climatic assertion of the entire Gospel. In John 1:1 we have heard that ‘The Word was God.’ Now at the end of the gospel it is finally Thomas who asserts ‘My Lord and My God.’ Some commentators argue that this is a OMG sort of exclamation – ‘it’s you, and you’re alive, OMG’ – but John’s placing of it here at the end of the gospel, and crucially Jesus’ response in the next verse clearly implies that Thomas should be known as the ‘one who finally tells us who Jesus is.’ A dangerous claim as John was writing about the same time that the Emperor Domitian had proclaimed himself ‘*dominus et deus noster*’ (Our Lord and God).

‘Doubting Thomas’ -Serodine



Friday – The miraculous catch of fish – John 21:1-14

An extract from the text:

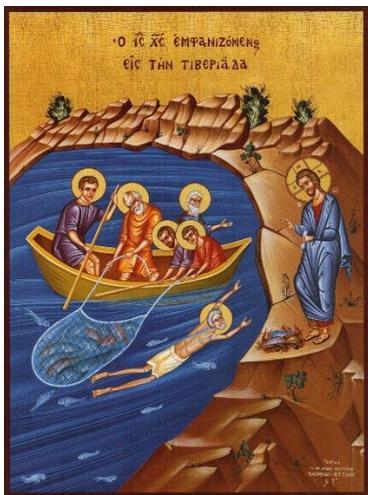
He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

This text is so rich it is difficult to know where to start. For one thing it probably proves that readers of John were expected to be familiar with the other gospels – otherwise the disciples going *back to* fishing makes no sense, and furthermore the similarities with Luke 5 are striking. Then there is the idea of 'revelation', of truly knowing who Jesus is, that lies at the heart of John's gospel. The symbolic contrast between fishing by night (catching nothing) and fishing by day (with nets bursting). The contrast (made much of in early Christianity) between the 'contemplative' beloved disciple who sees, and the 'active' Simon Peter who leaps from the boat and swims ashore. The puzzle of 153 (a triangular number, and perhaps an encoded reference to Hebrew place names). Another lakeside miracle involving fish and bread. Peter again before a charcoal fire – the last time he was in the courtyard denying Christ, so this sets the scene for his rehabilitation in the next verses.

But to pick on one allusion I would encourage you to look at Ezekiel 47. Here we are told that the river running from the Temple (a reference picked up in Revelation) is extraordinarily abundant in fish stocks. We might think that the resurrected life is about something rather ghostly and ephemeral – the spirit world. But as alluded to in earlier reflections, C S Lewis reminds us that in the bible this is not the case. The new heaven and new earth are far more substantial - put your foot on heavenly grass and the grass will cut through the flesh.

We hear much of the abilities of the 'virtual' world during the Coronavirus lockdown, and indeed technologically it is astonishing and really useful. But we should not retreat into it permanently. God calls us to a world that is even more 'real' than the present one.



Saturday – Jesus appears to the twelve on a mountain in Galilee – Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

This passage is well known by scholars and perhaps for reasons that might sow seeds of doubt for Christians. Luke, who continues the story in Acts, places the disciples firmly in Jerusalem at this point, and the command both to baptise and do so in the name of the Trinity, particularly to the Gentiles, is a new and surprising development for Matthew. Rather than spill for ink over those words, we might instead look at the doubt which itself features in this passage. It does so in a most surprising way.

For we are told, that just at the moment that surely, finally, the eleven must have got it – here he is, large as life, standing in front of them, raised from the dead – some worshipped, but some (of the eleven!) doubted.

On April 26th 1610 a group of 24 professors gathered in Magini’s house in Bologna to look through the newly invented telescope with its inventor Galileo. Far from being triumphant after this demonstration, the next day Galileo was apparently found in a foul mood, because far from making things clearer, no one could agree what they actually saw through the telescope (a substantial minority asserted that the moon was a ‘doughnut’ with a hole at its centre).

The point is that when we see something utterly new, even in – particularly in – science, often people don’t see clearly what is there, especially when it is the last thing they expect. We are now offered fantastically detailed images of the moon and stars in childhood books, and most children will have looked through a telescope or binoculars by the time they are 5 or 6. So our brains are ‘trained’ to interpret what we see.

The appearance of Jesus was something utterly new, utterly contrary to expectation. So it was unsurprising that some worshipped and some doubted. But the story and witness of the early church and those eleven (at least ten of whom went to martyrs deaths, presumably not still doubting) does not end there. After those first few decades one can of course doubt that Christ is risen, but then you are also at liberty to believe that the moon has a hole in the middle or indeed is made of cheese.

