**
Acts 3.11-20
Luke 24.36-48
18th April 2021

 What does an Easter Church look like?**

**Part 1**
Historians love eye-witness accounts. Watch a documentary on something like the fateful voyage of RMS Titanic in 1912 and it is likely to end with an interview from 1990 from Eva Hart, the last of the surviving 700 passengers from a ship that carried 2,200.

No doubt the documentary will have rehearsed all the facts, yet nothing, I suspect, makes quite as much impact as hearing Eva Hart tell the story of her father putting her and her mother into a lifeboat, telling her to be good, and then saying goodbye to them for ever. She was the last eyewitness to what went on that night of 14th April just over a hundred years ago, and she told the story unemotionally yet with a stoic authority that somehow makes it the final, and most important word on the subject.

I’m struck, in this post Easter season, as we look at some passages from The Acts of the Apostles, that Peter describes himself and John as ‘witnesses’ of the resurrection. So, he retells the story of Easter not theoretically but personally, and in a way, it is his story as much as it is Christ’s. And, therefore, Peter’s words hold quite some passion in today’s passage; he comes over with the conviction of a witness. He shared these days, lived them alongside Jesus, and was ultimately and utterly transformed by them.

Now, all of this happens as Peter and John, we are told, go up to The Temple. There is an intriguing detail in this story as we are even told the time of the afternoon prayer service to which they were going; it was 3pm!

En route they encounter a lame man who they heal.

Such stories are told in Acts and become signs that Jesus’ mission of offering compassion and wholeness continued after his death through the ongoing ministry of his followers.

In a time before modern medicine, people looked for miracles. Jesus was considered worth listening to by many because he was also a healer and an exorcist. So, post resurrection his disciples follow in that tradition.

There is a positive and a negative to all this. There was then and there is now.

On the positive side these acts of compassion and healing proclaim a central truth in Jesus’ ministry, that God’s greatest desire for us is wholeness and a liberation from everything that brings oppression. Jesus said he had come to bring life, and life in all its fulness.

So, we understand why today, in supporting the VaccinAid campaign, the Archbishop of Canterbury writes: *There is no better way to show our deep gratitude for the gifts of science and medicine than making sure vulnerable people around the world are also given a shot.*

The negative, according to Jesus, is that some people only followed him because of these healings. That is a sort of consumer attitude to faith all about what I can get out of it.

Here is what scripture says in John 2: *While he was in Jerusalem for Passover many put their trust in him when they saw the signs that he performed. But Jesus for his part would not trust himself to them.*
All of us must come to some kind of worked through understanding about God when sad or bad things come our way and the longed-for healings do not happen. Faith is often, understandably, shaken at such moments.

For myself, the greatest strength and comfort I find on occasions of loss and struggle is that central biblical statement that GOD IS LOVE.

And then I tie that up with what I consider to be the greatest poem ever written, Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13, when he says LOVE BEARS ALL THINGS, LOVE NEVER GIVES UP. Such wonderful words. Words, I think, to live by.

In the middle of any struggle, and surrounding any tragedy, there will probably be a great sense of isolation. Jesus experienced that too on the cross as he cries out *Why have you forsaken me?* And yet, as the intensity of that sense of aloneness begins to fade, we can become increasingly aware that love, and therefore by definition God, has never left us. For *love bears all things.*I do not think we will ever be doing the work of God, the work of love more than when we travel, faithfully, alongside a terminally ill or mentally distressed friend or as we sit and simply listen to a someone close to us who has lost someone close to them. We cannot offer miracles that cure, yet we can offer love that sustains and that, I believe, is truly God at work amongst us and through us.

**Part 2**

Minister: For the Word of God is scripture
**All: For the Word of God among us**
Minister: For the Word of God within us
**All: Thanks be to God. Amen**

Now, in today’s passage Peter gives one of his best sermons, even though he is not in a pulpit. He responds to the astonishment of the crowd who had just witnessed this work of compassion by himself and John, and he responds with a speech.

It was common practice for writers like Luke, who wrote Acts, to give historical figures this sort of manifesto moment. In it they would outline, or profile, who they were and what motivated and inspired them. Peter does that here in giving us his commentary on what he believes went on that first Good Friday and Easter Day.

Because he is speaking to Jews and because he has this phrase: *you put him to death,* it has been said that New Testament passages such as this one, have over the years inflamed anti-Semitic tendencies.

Even today I have come across Jewish friends at events who have asked me to go back to my congregation and make it clear that they did not kill Jesus.

It is a tragedy if passages like today’s continue to fuel that way of thinking because is it not also clear from today’s reading of just how important and valued the Jewish tradition was in Peter’s life. He willingly invokes and identifies with the memory and inspiration of the God of Abraham, Jacob and, I quote, ‘our fathers’. And as we have already noted, post resurrection these two disciples are keeping an appointment to pray at The Temple.

I see that in a few months’ time the foundation stone will be laid for a new building in Berlin that will be home to a Christian Church, a Jewish Synagogue, and an Islamic Mosque, all three prayer spaces connected by a Communal Hall. It is going to be called; The House of One. And this is what one of its founders, the Lutheran Pastor, Gregor Hohberg says about it: *At the original place of Berlin, where the city was born and where its first church stood, there should be music of the future. A sacred house of several religions will now grow from the foundations of the old churches. The people there will remain true to their own faith, live by its strength, and enter into peace-loving conversation with one another and with the secular urban society. It will be a house in which justice, peace, and reconciliation dwell.*

It seems to me the House of One will be a beautiful symbol of love and life.

And that is what Peter pleads for here in this major speech of his life. He talks of Jesus’s death with great sorrow, and he compares and contrasts Good Friday with Easter Day. The first, he says, is a picture of death and hate, the later he proclaims is God’s response, never one of retribution but of life and love.

So, I think today’s passage is, in fact, the beginnings of an answer to a question. And this question will, in a way, be asked again and again in this fifth book of the New Testament as it is, in part, the reason why The Acts of The Apostles was written by Luke, because it seeks to answer that vital question: What does an Easter Church look like?

Well, here are three responses from Acts 3.

An Easter Church tells the stories of Jesus.

Peter spends a lot of time deflecting attention away from himself in today’s passage. He doesn’t want to be the hero who healed the lame man. Instead, he refocuses the spotlight and shines it on Jesus; his life, death, and resurrection.

A hymn we used to sing back in the church where I grew up had that memorable first line: *Tell me the stories of Jesus.* Not a bad mission statement for any church today. We are the Storykeepers and whether from pulpit, house group, Junior Church class or general conversation, part of being an Easter Church is to tell the stories. It’s what we sometimes refer to as *Keeping the Rumour of God alive.*Secondly, a Church that seeks to live in the dawn of Easter Day, is surely one that promotes life.

In Solomon’s Portico a lame man is healed and can walk again. I suspect we rarely think of his backstory. Of the complete sense of dependence he would have experienced alongside the bleakest of futures. Everyday he would have struggled to find enough to eat, every month his general health would have deteriorated and every year he would have become further and further detached from society. But now, he was walking and leaping and praising God. Now, life had once more opened up and become full of possibilities. This was his resurrection moment.

I look at the list of all the causes we seek to support in our monthly communion offerings, of the work done by our link missionaries in Mozambique, of Duncan Dyason’s work with Street Children in Guatemala and I think I see the heartbeat of an Easter Church there, one which worships and seeks to follow a life affirming God.

And then, in reading our passage this morning I just love the fact that it isn’t just a story in the singular about Peter. All that happens in Acts 3 is done by a team of two, by Peter and John. They had remembered, maybe, how Jesus had once sent them out two by two during their apprentice years.

An Easter Church is full of teams of people working together.

I was very moved recently to read a newspaper piece written by the journalist John Harris as he reflected on filling in the recent census. He ticked the box that said he was of no religious persuasion and that seemed fine and honest at the time. But it obviously nagged away at him and he ended up writing a piece that ended like this:
*For many of us, life without God has turned out to be life without fellowship and shared meaning – and in the midst of the most disorientating, debilitating crisis most of us have ever known, that social tragedy now cries out for action.*

I thought they were profound words uttered from the heart: *a life without God has turned out to be a life without fellowship and shared meaning.*An Easter Church surely tries to fill such a void. Post resurrection Jesus often appears to the disciples collectively and here at the Beautiful Gate of the city Peter and John acted together.

We have done much as individuals during Lockdown, and increasingly the challenge before us will be to find a renewed sense of coming together in community. Of worshipping together. Of praying together and of serving together.

Today we have, as it were, been in the crowd and watched Peter and John heal a lame man on their way to worship at the Temple. And we have glimpsed what Easter Church might look like in any generation. A community that tells the stories of Jesus, celebrates and shares the abundant life of God, and does this together.

May it be so for our church community as we too seek to walk in the glow of a resurrection dawn. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 1st April 2021*