

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 22 APRIL 2012

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Luke 24: 36b-48

“Fish on the Table”

Thirty years ago I wrote a thesis for my Masters degree about the resurrection. When I started the research I was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery once and for all. When I finished I was no closer to any historically reliable answer. On the contrary, the mystery had only deepened. It convinced me that historical truth, in a modern sense, is impossible to obtain where the resurrection of Jesus is concerned. We will never know what exactly happened. I also discovered that, for myself, after spending a couple of years on the subject, whatever happened then was no longer important. What is important is that Jesus is alive today, not because of a tomb that was, or was not empty, or a man who was, or was not resuscitated, but because I, as well as others, experience him here and now, as a living reality. Whatever are the historical or not so historical (in a modern sense) facts of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, what is important to us is to see how they relate (or not) to our own historical reality here and now.

We will lay out some ground rules about the resurrection stories before we start on the story that we find before us today.

The stories we have about the resurrected Jesus are inconsistent and impossible to harmonise as far as place and time are concerned. There is no way in the world you can bring them together and shape them into one, consistent story about “what happened after” unless his friends were able to travel at lightning speed between Jerusalem and other places like Galilee in the few weeks he is reported to have appeared to them.

With the material we have it is impossible to ascertain the historical facts, the only thing we have is stories, and we do well to remember that those stories were written at least 30 or 40 years after the event and that they were written with an agenda that was different for each of the reports we have. The gospel writers never sat down to write a modern historical report of what occurred. Their genre is not factual, scientific reporting, but the proclamation of a profound mystery they have come to experience in their lives and want others to share in the stories about the resurrected Jesus don’t talk about what could be taken as a resuscitated body or a ghost most of the time. He walks through doors and walls for instance, something that would be really hard with a resuscitated body. But he seems, at the same time, more human than any ghostlike appearance would ever be.

The things that are told about the resurrected Jesus are very particular, they are things which connect his post-Easter profile with his pre-Easter life. Nothing new happens, it is all re-hashing of the story. The gospels go to great lengths to tell us it was the same Jesus before and after, that he had not been changed in any way, that he still said and did the same things.

There is more to say but this will do for now.

So, let us look at Luke’s narrative about what happened after the crucifixion in chapter 24:

On the first day, at dawn, women go to the tomb to take care of the body as any loving, caring friends would. But instead of one dead body they meet two men in dazzling clothes who tell them

“he is risen” and gently remind them of aspects of Jesus’ teaching where they were told, before his death, that suffering and death would not have the last word and even how this suffering and death were consistent with the history of God with his people as they knew it. The women are told to go and remind the other friends of Jesus of this - who, of course, don’t believe one word of what they are saying. Peter goes to check and finds the tomb empty, with the linen cloths neatly put to one side. The bindings of death had been cut loose!

Then we, as readers, are shown another scene, happening slightly later in the day. Two friends on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus meet a stranger on the road. They are confused, and this stranger sorts them out by listening to them, talking to them and, finally, guiding them to parts of scripture that help them develop their understanding of the issues. Then, after they invite the stranger into their home to have a meal with them they suddenly, and unexpectedly, experience the presence of the living Christ in the breaking of the bread.

They then run all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the others. By which time the Lord has also appeared to Simon. Still everybody is much confused and unsure about what it all means. And who wouldn’t be?

And then, and this is where we started reading this morning, suddenly Jesus appears in their midst.

Luke sure takes his time to get to this point in his narration of the story. First he presents us with a couple of women (whose testimony is worthless in a court of law remember), then there is an empty grave, a couple of angels, Peter checking up and confirming their findings. Only later do we discover the risen Christ may have appeared to him, who has not been portrayed as the most reliable or understanding of Jesus’ disciples so far. Then there are the two friends meeting a stranger on the road who seems to have some more insight in what has happened and why. It is then, and only then! Jesus’ living presence is finally experienced. And it is experienced at a meal table, while they are breaking bread. Luke sets the scene very carefully, and when Jesus finally appears it is in a very specific way.

Now what would Luke’s readers have imagined or expected to happen when someone who has been wrongfully killed comes back from the dead? What would you expect that to look like? Shining and dazzling clothes of course, fire and brimstone, thunder and lightning, confrontation and violent reprisals for the perpetrators of the injustice, and glorious banners announcing victory for those who have stayed with him till the end.

Not so! Although the two messengers appear in dazzling clothes, Jesus does not. Not at all! He is in fact so inconspicuous that those who know him don’t even recognise him when they meet him on the road. And where he talks there are no exhortations about how wrong the world has been to nail him to the cross. There is careful, caring, explanation, exploration and interpretation as to how his journey fits in with, and gives further and deeper meaning to, the journey God has been on with his people for a long time already. Showing them that what they thought of as catastrophe was in fact consistent with the way of God’s people and prophets over the ages. And who meets him first? Not the disciple that loved him most, or behaved the bravest, but the one who denied knowing him at the most crucial (!) time. It looks like the experience of the presence of the living Christ takes time to materialise, and when it does it is first with those who have wandered off or turned their back.

The moment of truth is when bread is broken. And that is no coincidence. Luke crafts his narrative very carefully when he links the first appearance of the resurrected Lord with the breaking of bread. Jesus’ life was a life lived breaking and sharing bread at every opportunity, right until that last, faithful night where they were gathered in that upper room in Jerusalem and Jesus, for the first time,

said those mysterious words: "This is my body".

But the reality, the truth of that is not limited to the past. In the life of the congregation Luke is writing for, the practice of breaking bread and remembering the meals Jesus shared with his friends and especially that last meal have become a regular practice and mark of their identity. It is there they still meet with and experience the living Christ.

Look, Luke says, proof that life conquers death, that Christ is risen, is where bread is broken and we experience him still with us, giving us life, opening our heart, offering us guidance for our journey like it did to those two men on their way to Emmaus.

But there is more. He appears again. This time it is a bit like a ghost would. But he isn't a ghost. Would a ghost have holes in his hands and feet? In his side? Wouldn't you have expected those holes to have been healed on a vindicating return?

No says Luke. It is not a glorified ghost in shining armour come to avenge, it is Jesus of Nazareth, with holes in his hands and feet. It is not an apparition, a figment of their imagination, it is in fact something that their minds would have struggled to construct.

And we struggle with it. Death did not put an end to this life filled with compassion. Jesus of Nazareth is not finished. His practice of sharing meals, his self giving love has not gone the way of so many others who have lived that kind of life. He is not dead. He is still present, and especially where bread is broken and people meet around the scriptures and try to understand the ways of God.

Not in dazzling whites to call his tormentors to account, but with the marks of his suffering still very visible and tangible showing who and what he was. What he lived for has only deepened and become more profoundly meaningful. This Messiah is not the glorious figure everyone would have expected.

His disciples can't take it in! What is this? How are they to understand this? Who is this? What is this?

"Do you have anything here I can eat?"

That they put fish on the table is, again, no coincidence. Fish figures hugely in their history with Jesus. They are fishermen, fish has been an integral part of their journey with him. They were called from their nets, they have cast their nets, they have shared fish at meals, sometimes sharing in mind-bending abundance of it. And of course, Luke's audience at the time when he is writing his gospel, had begun to leave the sign of the fish to mark the meeting places of the people of "Christ's way". Ichthus, the word for fish in greek is an acronym for Jesus Christ, Son of God. What Jesus eats in the story is what the story reveals: Jesus Christ, Son of God is present, here in this room, fishing and fisher of men. Sharing meals with his disciples as he has done before his death, inspiring them, teaching them, loving them, caring for them, guiding them and..... encouraging them to leave their bolt hole and go out into the world to bear witness to this extraordinary experience and proclaim the good news of Christ's victory.

Death has died. Bitterness, reproof, blame, vengeance, have died. Reconciliation, forgiveness, love and compassion live. Suffering may be part of that journey of love, but it is in no way the end of it.

Have you met him yet? Felt his presence on the road? Recognised him where bread was broken? Where a meal was shared? Are you ready to welcome this unobtrusive stranger marked with the wounds of death into your home and heart? Or are you still waiting for something more glorious?

Are you ready to follow the pattern of love that is defined by the cross? Are you prepared to see woundedness as an indication God cannot be far off redeeming, reaffirming, recreating, forgiving, atoning? Or are you still hesitant, loitering around the empty grave, wondering if it is true what others say, not sure you are prepared to accept that the way of this Messiah is not one of power or glory, of dazzling clothes, but of giving, sharing, breaking, offering, forgiving, suffering, compassion, and reaching out to what is in need of support and care?

Are you ready to welcome that bread-breaking, fish-eating presence with the marks of suffering still on his body and model your life on his? To become part of those who put the acronym "fish" on the table wherever there is violence and death and proclaim: Ichthus, Jesus Christ, Son of God. Who break bread believing that wherever they are he will be present to listen and to guide. Amen.