

**SERMON**  
**Resurrection Appearances Part I**  
**Luke 24. 36b-48**  
**26 April 2009**  
**All Saints Church, Witley**

There's so much to be said about resurrection appearances of Jesus like that one that I'd like to depart from our usual practice and do a sermon in two parts. So part one is today but – I'm afraid that, due to the AST service next week and two guest preachers the following week, part two will be in three weeks time on 17 May. But don't worry, I'll remind you on that occasion of the essence of what I've said this morning so the two sermons will still fit together.

Now, I imagine you'll all remember the man who, through some notoriety, was just known as 'the Bishop of Durham' in the 1980's. David Jenkins was a hate figure in some quarters for his liberal views on the biblical account of Jesus' life, teachings and resurrection. On one occasion David Jenkins received a letter that simply said, 'May you rot in hell – signed "a true Christian"'. But what you may not fully appreciate is that the kind of beliefs that David Jenkins had were and still are taught on most of the non-evangelical clergy training courses of this country.

And even the evangelicals often have to show a thorough knowledge of such beliefs when it comes to examinations – and, moreover, to play the game in exams of apparently sharing those beliefs. All this was certainly the case when I was in training in Oxford in the mid-1980s (at a non-evangelical college).

Although I reluctantly came to accept that there was significant merit in these liberal biblical interpretations, I still disagreed with or had grave concerns about certain fundamental aspects of them.

Our New Testament tutor was a fully paid-up liberal biblical critic. He was an extremely intelligent man who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of both the Scriptures and the current trends in interpreting them. If you get into an academic argument with him you had to really know your stuff.

On the question of the resurrection of Jesus, he used to say that he didn't believe in the empty tomb but, he did believe that 'something happened to convince the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. But he never said what that 'something' was. One day I saw a friend of mine who was about to go into a one-to-one tutorial with this teacher. They were due to discuss the resurrection. I encouraged my friend to really push the tutor to say exactly what he thought had happened and not to let him off the hook. So when my friend came out, I asked what the man had said. Apparently he had said, 'I think the disciples saw a ghost.' I had to admit to a degree of incredulity that this fine scholar was prepared to adduce countless reasons for disbelieving the physical resurrection of the previously dead body of Jesus only to swallow without too many problems the idea of a ghost. That incredulity is compounded by the fact that Jesus Himself seems to have been at pains to deal precisely with the belief that He was a ghost. That was the immediate reaction of the disciples in our Gospel narrative today and it was accompanied by utter terror. But immediately Jesus calmed the terror by saying 'a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones as you can see I have. Touch me and see'. It is almost as if He foresaw the Bishop of Durhams of the world and took action to head them off at the pass. And Jesus reinforced His point by asking for something to eat in the disciples presence. Incidentally, some Jewish friends once said to me that's exactly what you'd expect a good Jew to do. When I asked 'why?' they replied that all the major Jewish festivals are connected with food. With commendable humour they said that a remembering of this persecution or that exile or pogrom is always followed by everybody effectively saying, 'it was awful. Let's eat'. Jews tend to be real foodies. Jesus too seems to have enjoyed His food. Look at all the meals he attended.

But back to the resurrection. Jesus, then, wanted His disciples to see that it was a physical event – and yet it's unlike any physical event that anyone alive today has ever witnessed. His body had substance, yet it could appear and disappear at will and go through walls and locked doors. He was recognizably Jesus yet He looked different and people could fail to recognise Him. All very puzzling and almost reminiscent of the behaviour of virtual particles as described by quantum physics which come and go, can be in two places at once and even behave differently depending on whether or not they're being observed.

But what about the meaning of the risen Jesus? What are some of the things we can say about that? Well, first of all, the risen Jesus shows us that the survival of death is personal not impersonal as Eastern religious believe. Secondly, the implication is that we will recognize each other even though, in some inexpressible way, we'll have been changed. And not only will we recognize each other but perhaps we too will recognize Jesus rather like the witnesses to the resurrection immediately or eventually did. As C.S. Lewis wrote, perhaps we will say, when confronted after death with Christ, "So, it was you all along".

Thirdly, the resurrection shows us that what really matters and what will survive death is being in relationship. Again, with each other and with God. Life – being alive and not being obliterated by death – is relationship with God and others. As a psychotherapist who frequently sees the extraordinary healing power of groups, I find that idea very interesting and not at all surprising. No individual can have a history that is devoid of relationship. Every individual is a group – genetically and psychologically. Bad experiences in family groups make us ill. Good experiences in groups – like therapy groups – can heal.

So relationships continues beyond death as does recognition and as does everything that makes us personal beings not faceless automata.

But there's something else that seems to survive death – something which we often fail to notice but which is often there in the resurrection narratives – scars. As it says in today's Gospel, 'He showed them His hands and His feet' – clearly meaning the marks left by the nails of crucifixion. What are the implications of that? Well here's where I'll make a start this week and carry on 17 May because there's so much to say.

This week I'll just make the obvious point that it's not just resurrection that transforms us but suffering too. The things that make us stop and think, the things that make us struggle, the things that purify and cleanse us – the difficulties, what Churchill called 'the hammer blows of adversity' – all these transform us. Or at least they can. They may just make us bitter and transform us for the worse. I remember when I was 22 meeting an elderly World War One veteran whose entire conversation was taken up with morbid repetition of the fact that his generation had been told this was the war to end all wars and look what had happened. He was sunk in a morose regurgitation of that statement in a variety of forms. That's not to say he wasn't right. Clearly he was and clearly too he had really suffered both in that war and subsequently. But it had made him bitter and had poisoned him to the core.

Look also at Morgan Tsuangirai and Robert Mugabe. On the day of the signing of the so-called 'power-sharing agreement, Tsuangirai, who had suffered dreadfully at the hands of Mugabe and has suffered even more dreadfully since (whether or not again at the hands of Mugabe remains to be seen) – Tsuangirai spoke of new beginnings, of the putting aside of old hatreds, of reconciliation, of working for a common course. Mugabe on the other hand spoke of nothing but Western conspiracies and enemies to be destroyed. His paranoia was there for all to see and Tsuangirai sat there almost imperceptibly shaking his head.

If we can't let go of past suffering and past rage, it can destroy us. But we have to face it first or we'll probably never let go of it. And we may need help to do that. It's a real test of character for us. Can we find the strength and courage to face the things that have wounded us so they don't remain snarling and raw but rather heal up and become healthy scars?

And it's to the subject of scars, the scars of the risen Christ and the scars that we will bear beyond death that we'll return when we pick all this up again on May 17.

Amen