

SERMON
John 20. 24-29
Resurrection Appearances Part 2
17 May 2009
All Saints Church, Witley

What I'm going to do this morning is slightly unusual because it's Part Two of a sermon which I actually began three Sundays ago!! As I explained on that occasion, I want to talk about aspects of the resurrection appearances of Jesus – a subject so huge that it's worth talking a bit of extra time over – especially in these weeks of Easter.

The reason why there's been a three week gap is that we first had our AST service intervening and then two guest preachers last week.

Now if you weren't here three weeks ago or you've forgotten what I said (which I imagine you may have), then don't worry because I'll repeat briefly the points I made then, and anyway, today's sermon will stand on its own. Hope that's all clear.

Well three weeks back we looked at the resurrection appearance to the disciples that is described in Luke's Gospel. We say Jesus at pains to convey to the disciples that He wasn't a ghost. We considered also some of the implications of the resurrection appearances – for example, the personal survival of death and the fact that we will recognize each other and very possibly God beyond death. And we ended up just beginning to consider the importance of something that's often overlooked – the fact that Jesus still bore the scars of crucifixion in His risen body. That is very clear not just in Luke's Gospel but particularly in John's gospel in that famous narrative today of the appearance to doubting Thomas.

So we pondered three weeks back how suffering can make us more Christ-like or make us bitter and full of rage. And we thought about the need to face and then let go of any things from the past that threaten to destroy, poison or obsess us. Scars need to heal and not to remain open wounds.

But what are some of the other implications of the fact that the risen Jesus still bore the scars of death in His body? For what follows I'm drawing on the thinking of our Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

First of all, the enduring presence of the scars shows us – obviously – that even resurrection was not enough to wipe out, as it were, the experience of death. Jesus is showing us that we live in a world where death is so powerful that even in Him, the risen Christ, it's still there. What death does to us is so great that it remains with us somehow in eternity.

Needless to say, the power of death is one of the major things from which Jesus was liberating us in His resurrection. Without Him, we're on a heading for annihilation. The self that is cut off from God is a self without substance and without a future. Human beings have a paradoxical drive to be independent of God, independent of the One who alone can ensure our ultimate survival.

The next implication of Jesus bearing still the marks of the cross is that we, the Church, must always be honest about the power of death. The future that God promises us is not a denial of death and it does not explain away suffering. For example, just imagine two parents whose child has been murdered. If, on the Last Day, the answer to their question "why?" can be given in a glib form, then something is very wrong. "It's all clear now why your child was murdered, isn't it?" 'Oh yes, it's all clear now'. That would be horribly glib.

Equally wrong is the idea that in heaven the past is eradicated. The bad things that we do and the bad things that are done to us can't 'un-happen.' What's done is done. But for our sins there is forgiveness and for our suffering we are promised a future life that is given so abundantly that we will be able to speak of unbearable pain. Pain is not turned to good by some magic but past pain somehow will become the ground for a deeper communion with God

and a deeper love for Him. In the future life, the memory of pain can be given to someone for their healing, for an initiation into love.

So the resurrection means that pain can be an entry into communion with God, not that pain and death will be denied or explained away.

What other implications are there of the continuing scars of crucifixion in Jesus' risen body?

Well not only must the Church be honest about the power of death, it must also avoid the temptation of pretending that the power of death and sin and frailty is not at work within the Church itself. What has been called 'an evangelical cheerfulness calculated to annoy' is not helpful. One sometimes encounters individual Christians and even whole churches where something just doesn't ring true because it's all smiles and joy and fluffy kittens. Joy is important, of course. It's a fruit of the Holy Spirit but false jollity is different and anyway there's nothing wrong with seriousness and genuine joy co-habiting.

So we mustn't lie about the reign of death even in the Church. The Church longs to succeed and to be pure and without difficulties, disagreements and shadows. But is that perhaps a longing for something that is impossible in a temporal world? Just because we're converted it doesn't mean that we're not still convalescent. It's not yet over. We're still being made. We still want to sin and we still do. As Rowan Williams puts it beautifully, 'We're still tormented by strange dreams.' So don't foreclose it all this side of our own death and resurrection. Maybe perfection can't happen in this world of death. We mustn't be impatient. To preach the resurrection is to preach that a newness has begun – and that's all. The finished product is not yet here. In all these reflections on the marks of crucifixion that Jesus displayed at and after Easter, I suppose you could say that there's a tension – a tension between the awfulness of death and the sovereignty of God. We often tend to slip into an over-emphasis on the one or the other, becoming bogged down either in a depressive hopelessness about the world – or swept away by a denial of harsh reality. Balance is everything.

One final word. When we read the account of Jesus' resurrection, it's easy to emerge from them confused, and maybe were even meant to. They are full of paradoxes and contradictions. They are shot through with an elusiveness that makes it hard to pin down what actually happened. In fact it's impossible to pin down. The Gospel of Matthew, Luke and John are trying to describe the indescribable. They are trying to put into temporal and spatial terms what happened when the extra-temporal and extra-spatial burst into our world. Language is breaking down as the Gospel writers write. We move from an angel saying 'He's not here' at the tomb to angels saying 'He's not here' at the ascension – a fitting allusion to that elusiveness. We simply have no idea what it was like to meet the risen Christ.

And, if you think about it, you may find it hard also to give a clear and precise account of how you've experienced the resurrection at work in your own life. I know I do.

But I also know that I have experienced something of it. And I also remember reading a letter from a dying Christian man who said of his experience, 'It's so exciting.'

For now, we see through a glass darkly but before too long we will each have our own direct face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ.

Amen