

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Luke 24:36-49 ("Jesus Appears to His Disciples")

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

O worship the King all glorious above (CH127)

God is Love, his the care (CH193)

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want (CH14)

May the mind of Christ my Saviour (536)

Look forward in faith (237)

People who are passionate about the Bible tend, in my experience, to fall into one of two camps. For some people, their intense connection to Scripture leads them to believe that the Bible must be factually accurate in every regard. For others, the more they engage with the words on the page, the more they find the Word of God present among them, even in the midst of historical uncertainty and textual difference. Certainty on the one hand, perhaps, and wonder on the other.

This season of Easter is a good time to explore the issue of “what Scripture is and is not”, because when it comes to the really important biblical passages (as you encounter in the Easter stories) the reader has not *one* source to call upon but a full *four*: the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And as you might fully expect, when you have four writers rather than one, you end up with four stories, each one bringing its own viewpoint and often its own unique agenda.

For many readers, this may threaten to open an unwelcome door to problems of mental conflict. If there had been only one singular account of the Crucifixion and one singular burial, followed a day-and-a-half later by one singular Resurrection, then surely that very singularity would be helpful to these readers, pinning down what actually - *factually* - happened. As it is, these readers feel perplexed - maybe even let down - by having a full *four* gospel writers who just don't seem to speak with one voice on the most important topic in the entire Bible: the return to life of Jesus Christ on Easter Day.

As you may recall from previous sermons in bygone years, one of my favourite stories of Easter confusion comes from Bishop Yvette Flunder in the United States. She once preached a sermon in which she noted the consternation of her congregation over what did or didn't happen in the Resurrection. The people wanted clearcut answers, yet this thoughtful preacher struggled to come up with anything that might satisfy them.

It's such a great story that it bears retelling once more. Here's what she said:

... the more I grow, the less I seem to be certain about. This is a great struggle for me because I'm used to having answers. So people ask me in my congregation, 'What about this or that?' And I say, 'Honey, I don't know.'

They say, "You don't know? But you're the pastor!"

'Yeah, but I still don't know. I don't know!'

And the kids ask hard questions: 'Who got to the tomb first? Was it Mary? Was it Peter? We can't get it hooked up.' I told them, "I don't know."

The fact of the matter is that the ancient sages who put our Bible together did us all an enormous service by *not* doing two big things. The first thing which the Bible compilers didn't do was to choose one single gospel which would tell the story of Jesus to the world. That would have been so easy to do. They might have had a big debate over which was the one true gospel account. But they didn't. They wanted all four voices to be heard. And so all four gospels made the final cut.

The second thing which the Bible compilers didn't do was to make one single pasteurised, homogenised book out of all four gospels. That would have been a whole lot more difficult to do, but make no mistake: they could have done it. Again, they might have had a big debate over what parables to leave in or what healings to take out. But once more (thank God) they didn't make that choice. They wanted all four voices to be heard, so (as noted just a moment ago) each of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were given their place.

Because of this, as readers of these very similar but also rather different texts, we enjoy both the rare privilege and the massive responsibility of taking in the rich “music” of the gospel story in high fidelity, quadraphonic sound. Four sources, not one, demand our attention and require our own 21st century thought processes to be let loose upon the four gospels.

Moving on to today’s reading, I wonder if you found it curiously familiar. The reality is that two weeks ago on Easter Day we heard John’s account of the Risen Christ appearing before the startled eyes of his disciples. A fortnight later we’re back to the same story, though this time penned from the viewpoint of Luke. Yes, it is the same story, yet it’s told in a different way by a different author at and most likely for a different readership. And that’s all good. By hearing from more than one biblical writer the Gospel message is able to be conveyed in a three-dimensional way as we take in the length, breadth and height of what’s going on.

Never forget, *there are variations to be found in the four gospels*. Do you feel challenged by that? Or are you happy to embrace difference and to allow your mind to roam freely across the questions which might come your way? For me, this issue of difference can often be an exciting one, as we look at different texts and draw out intriguing discrepancies of story-telling which might help us to look at the overall message with fresh eyes. And if we do this, those differences can actually propel us onward down fascinating avenues of discovery. One great example of this is found when we look at the Resurrection appearances of Jesus. And the difference, as we’ll see, lies between two words: “go”, and “stay”.

If we look closely at the final chapter of Matthew, we come across what’s known as Christ’s “great commission” to his followers: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...”. The message is very simple and very compelling: the work of Jesus has been done; his task is completed and now it’s time for his friends to move out into the world with the Good News with which they have been entrusted. “Go,” says Jesus. “... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

There seems to be an immediacy, an urgency, about this, as though Christ himself is saying: Don’t hang about. Go, and keep in mind that when you go I’ll be right there. So much for Matthew. But in Luke’s gospel the message handed on by the Risen Jesus is radically different. We’ve read it already today: “... *stay* here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Not “go” but “stay”. It’s not quite time yet. There’s more to come your way, and once Pentecost has arrived, the gift of God’s Holy Spirit will have fired up the new-born church and lifted their spirits and made them full and overflowing with a heavenly confidence which has never yet been known. So stay. Trust me: just stay.

What are we to make of this very substantial difference between “go” and “stay”? I am tempted to join with Bishop Flunder and yell at the top of my voice: “I don’t know! Honey, I don’t know!” Yet in a curious sense I like to think that I *do* actually know what is going on here. Matthew has heard the urgency of the Jesus story and homes in on that. Luke, meanwhile, feels deep inside that waiting for the Holy Spirit to come is so important that he really wants to stress that aspect of the Easter message. Maybe we should try to embrace both “go” and “stay” together, maybe that is what we just need to do, turning this contradiction around in our minds, juggling the options carefully and prayerfully in our thinking, and maybe just ending up a little bit wiser and a whole lot more engaged than if we only had one simple answer. *Go* with that thought ... and *stay* with it. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord God we sing aloud that you are Love.
Today we pray for those who don't know or feel your love:
for those who are lonely or depressed or isolated,
for those who feel far from you.
May your love surround them,
your care embrace them and
your Grace encircle them.
We pray for those who doubt your love;
those for whom war or grief,
injustice or poverty leave them
feeling hopeless or asking 'where is your God'?
May we find ways to be your hands and your voice,
championing your love
that seeks peace and justice, equity and hope.
In particular we pray for the people of Mariupol
caught in underground tunnels and temporary shelters,
that they might be granted safe passage out of the city.
Lord, we sing aloud that you are good, you are truth,
you are beauty and you are love.
Help us to live this song.
Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers fences (again):

I'm back to my occasional series on fences. Who knew you could get so much out of considering a humble construction of wood and nails?

When my neighbour Graham had to reinforce the fence we share he had to think about firm foundations. He was having to fix the fence because it didn't have enough of them. One approach for an existing fence is to ask yourself if there is something nearby with a firm base that you can fasten the fence to. In our case, my compost bins were used to support some of the fence. Another approach, also used in my garden, is to add a stay which is strong and secure and which gives support to a wobbly fence.

Of course, there are obvious parallels to all this fence supporting in our own lives. In an ideal world we all have our own deep roots and strong foundations. But the world is not ideal and often we find ourselves wobbling and swaying in the breeze, threatening to collapse at any moment. At these times the help and support of our friends, family and church are our stays and "borrowed" firm footing.

So, let us all be as like my compost bin as possible (!) – providing strength to those we love (and, indeed, those we don't) when their own foundations are a bit fragile.