

Sunday 14 April 2024, 3rd Sunday of Easter – Resurrection Encounters – Beth Keith

How should we understand the encounters with the risen Christ in the forty days between Easter and Ascension Day? Beth Keith offers a way by which we can also encounter the risen Christ.

Readings:

Luke 24: 36b-48 Psalm 4: 1-8

Sermon: Resurrection Encounters – Beth Keith

I wonder if we had been there in the days after the resurrection, what would we have been thinking and feeling. The passage we read this describes one of the resurrection encounters which happened in the forty days between Easter and Ascension. These days in which the disciples came to terms with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In the Gospels and at the start of the book of Acts we read about a number of different encounters which are presented as convincing proofs that Jesus was alive. Whilst all the gospels account for these days after the resurrection, each gives us a different perspective. Luke's Gospel is written in a way to make sense to people who didn't know the back story. To those who may not have known much about the Jewish scriptures. Luke also writes as a physician. In his Gospel and in the Book of Acts he attempts to dig out the facts, to find the eye witnesses, to delve into the physicality of what happened, and from that present proofs as evidence. He seems to write in an attempt to convince, to prove that these things, however strange and unlikely are the best possible explanation to fit with the facts. The proofs Luke gives us include the lack of a body in the tomb, the sightings of Jesus by different individuals and groups of people. Jesus walking and talking and eating with them. Jesus explaining the scriptures to open their minds as to why this had to happen, and showing them the scars, the physical signs of his death.

These writings certainly cannot give undeniable proof of resurrection. And they also give no explanation of how the resurrection occurred, or what happened at that point. But these events changed this group of disciples. Looking for reasonable proof and understanding shouldn't be ignored. Especially in religious settings questions must sit alongside belief. We don't want to be taken in by fanciful lies, or some kind of Derren Brown mass religious hypnosis, or the types of spiritual abuse currently being exposed in charismatic movements. These rational and reasonable proofs found in the text, have convinced people, over the centuries, that Christianity is credible, reliable, even if mysterious.

But I want to suggest today that in these accounts there is also something deeper going on. These appearances do not just attempt to give rational proof of Jesus' resurrection, because what we read in the gospels is a narrative about a community in trauma. They are not a group of people, on an alpha course, or in a confirmation class, discussing Christianity. They are a group of people who have just witnessed extreme violence, grief, and betrayal. We read in the accounts how the threat of ongoing violence left them feeling threatened, anxious and frightened. They needed time to recover, time to regain emotional and mental stability. We know that people respond to traumatic events in different ways. Sometimes there are no outward visible signs, and yet inside serious emotional reactions are taking place. Shock and denial is normal, a way of protecting oneself from the emotional impact of the event. After the initial shock, responses include dramatic mood changes, anxiety and nervousness, anger, depression, flashbacks, insomnia, intense fear, and withdrawal from normal activities. It would

be normal for the disciples to be experiencing these things. And the Gospel accounts hint at some of them.

Of course, this was also not a normal bereavement, not a normal trauma and we should not underestimate how Jesus' presence with them brought healing to their wounds and peace to their confusion. But equally we read in the gospels, that they struggled to understand and believe. The appearances do not seem clear, they do not immediately recognise him, and even when they recognise him, we read that some worshipped and some doubted. When we recall the events of Holy Week, we are ready for our sorrow to turn to joy because we remember Jesus' torture and death from the Easter Sunday perspective. For the disciples there was no instant over-night assurance. The appearances were not conclusive on Easter Sunday, they were not conclusive the next day nor the next. But over the next few weeks and months, in their mysterious encounters with Christ they moved from being a traumatised community to becoming the proclaiming and witnessing church.

So how do they get there? When Jesus appears to them, he does a few things. Firstly, he is present. He shows them his scars. The text suggests that he doesn't shrink back from the physical trauma of his death. But instead offers the signs of this to them. They can touch and remember, seeing both the wounds and the healing that has already begun. For those in trauma, reliving and remembering in a contained and safe place enables the start of a healing process, where memories are opened and reordered and put to rest. Jesus says to them. See me, I am here. Touch me, touch my scars, it happened. It was real.

Secondly, he enters into a process of explanation. He goes through the events and relates these, to things he had said earlier in his life, and to the scriptures which pointed to the death and resurrection of the messiah. Those in trauma go through a repeating cycle of working through what happened, and why it happened. Could we have stopped it, could we have done something different, what if we'd...As Jesus processes with them, and explains, these questions are given time to rise and to fall away.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we read that Jesus eats with them. Not once, and not as a proof that his body was real, but in most of the encounters he invites them to sit and eat together. There is something tangibly miraculous about sharing these meals together. Perhaps their minds are drawn back to that last supper. And to those words. This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me. And I wonder if when they shared the breakfast of cooked fish and bread by the water whether they reminisced about those 5 loaves and 2 fish, and that boy, and all those leftovers. To eat together is to say, life is possible again.

You see, in doing these, in being with his friends like this, Jesus didn't just show them that he wasn't a ghost, this wasn't just proof that he was alive. It was proof for them that they could keep living. That they could and they would keep returning to the table, remembering with joy and with sadness. That life came from death and the death could never hold that back. That death never had the final word. That whatever came, those who remained would keep eating. Keep committing to sharing this life, living this way. Because Jesus would always be with them.

There is so much in life that distracts and distorts, that pulls us away from God. In these resurrection appearances, we are reminded of God's promise. That there is no darkness, no place, no grave that God will not find us in, and love us back to life. It cannot explain away the horror of tragedy or the pain of grief. It cannot easily answer for the injustice, but that God persists, and braves the horror of bodies broken and left undone. That God meets us in our trauma and asks us to sit and eat with him. This is the work of God. And Jesus calls to us too.

Wherever find ourselves, Christ is there, inviting us to his table. Simply asking us to sit and eat and remember.

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