

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist

Easter 3

Sunday 18 April 2021

St Luke 24.36b–48



Jonah – or is it Christ?
(St Mary Antiqua, Rome, 275)

Anastasis (Resurrection)
(Mosaic, Daphne Monastery
Athens, c.1100)



*“We are the Easter people
and hallelujah is our song.”*

What do we make of this morning’s gospel story? We can probably understand how past generations might have accepted the literal truth of miracles and the Easter story. St Luke seems at pains to stress that it was a real person of flesh that the disciples encountered. They touched him and he ate a piece of broiled fish. But what do we make of it? Real people don’t just appear in locked rooms, especially after they’re dead, do they?

Two weeks ago on Easter Sunday we renewed our Baptismal promises. Our ritual was much abbreviated this year because of Covid. In a normal year we would have processed the Easter candle to the font, where it would have been lowered into the waters of baptism, recalling Christ’s baptism in the River Jordan.

Why do we do this on Easter Sunday? Hadn’t we just recalled our baptisms at Epiphany? Inside the ancient church of St Mary Antiqua in the Forum in Rome there’s a marble sarcophagus dating from about the year 275. At one end stands the

figure of Jonah. Or is it Christ? Because just as he's about to be thrown into the waters Jonah's standing with his arms outstretched, like Christ on the Cross.

St Matthew and St Luke both tell us that Jesus understood his ministry with reference to Jonah. Jonah is cast into the waters, swallowed by a large fish (which in the Old Testament can be thought of as a type of Satanic dragon), and miraculously he rises again to become the agent of God for the salvation not just of the Hebrews but of the Gentiles too.

Near the sarcophagus there's a wall-painting of the Resurrection. In Western art, paintings of the Resurrection tend to portray Christ near the Empty Tomb, but in Eastern Christianity the Risen LORD is shown reaching down to lift souls out of Hades. For the Resurrection isn't only about Christ's rising from the dead. It's about us too.

The Resurrection on Easter Day is not the only Resurrection in the Gospels. I'm not thinking of the raising of Lazarus, of the son of the widow of Nain, or of all those others who benefited from

Christ's healing miracles. I'm thinking of Jesus of Nazareth's other Resurrection experiences.

St Mark begins his gospel account with Jesus coming to the River Jordan. He goes down into the waters and then rises up. He sees "the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

Jesus is having what we might call a mystical experience. His contemporaries saw it as Resurrection, new birth, being born again. He experiences being taken up into heaven, into the presence of God who speaks directly to him. This is when he's commissioned as Messiah. Immediately following, still 'in the Spirit', he is driven out into the wilderness to think and pray about it. When he returns it's to usher in God's Kingdom. From now on, those who meet him are in the presence of One who has tasted the Kingdom.

Living in the Kingdom is living the risen life. Just as the angels serve God in heaven, so the new priesthood of Christian believers will serve God on earth. But not everyone understands this.

“Many are called” Jesus would say, “but few are chosen.” He calls twelve disciples. But it’s only *three* who are chosen to share a second taste of heaven on the Mount of the Transfiguration, and they don’t always understand – not till later.

The doubters, the people, the many people, Jesus encounters who don’t get his message – he describes them as being dead. Do you remember the man Jesus asked to follow him who replied that he had first to go and bury his father? “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” said Jesus. Most of us find that saying a bit heartless. But Jesus isn’t being a good pastoral vicar here. He’s making a point. He’s saying that his followers need to be Easter people.

Of course Jesus didn’t just think of his mission in terms of the sign of Jonah. He also used Passover imagery and the rituals of the Day of Atonement to understand what God wanted him to do. When he was crucified his disciples reflected on his teaching, and in particular on the imagery Jesus had used to explain it.

So when they thought about his Crucifixion and burial they did so in terms of Christ putting to death his old life as Jesus in Nazareth and putting on his new life as the Christ, when he'd gone down into the waters of baptism and rose up into the presence of God. And so we come to the events of that first Sunday night, when the disciples were gathered behind locked doors, probably in the same room where they'd eaten with Jesus for the last time.

They're upset and confused. A couple of their friends who'd set off for Galilee that morning, Cleopas (who was Jesus' uncle) and an unnamed companion, burst into the room, out of breath from having run back to Jerusalem from Emmaus. They sit round the table breaking bread, listening to Cleopas' story. It's just like Jesus is with them again. They're not in denial about Good Friday. The Crucifixion had happened. There are the marks to show it. But he's here now, just like they knew him before, the same Master who broke bread with them, drank wine with them, ate the fish that Peter used to catch in Galilee. All that teaching he once gave them, when he would take them aside privately, and expound the

scriptures, it all falls into place. Things they hadn't understood before now make sense. As they put it, "they saw and believed."

From now on Jesus' followers began living more intensely, like Jesus had called them to live, only this time they didn't just feel called. They felt chosen. They'd once been frightened, and they were probably frightened still. Now they faced their fears down. Before that first day of the week they'd been hesitant, timid. Now they were bold. They were the Easter people. And at Pentecost their re-birth will be confirmed anew.

Today we are the Easter people! When we come to church and take part in the liturgy, we are looking beyond the outward symbols of our ritual to the eternal truths beyond. When we break bread we're not just sharing with each other. We are also in Communion with Christ. OK, we're still sinners. We fall short. But we own up. We apologise to each other when we've given hurt. We extend our forgiveness to those who may have hurt us. What we believe about Christ and the Risen Life transforms all our relationships: with each other, with those whom we

love, with the world. And we share this good news with the world, because what we are experiencing has the power to transform not just us but all creation.

Finally, when things seem bad, and threaten to get us down, our response is now this: “Let the dead bury their dead. We are the Easter people. And hallelujah is our song!”