

Encountering the risen Jesus who transforms us

Over the past few weeks we have been reflecting together a lot on the resurrection, and on the fact that we worship a living God & a risen saviour. A few weeks ago, Paul talked to us about the way this living God speaks to us & guides us. Nancy talked to us about what it meant to see God's hand at work, & how we could be God's hands in the world. Last Saturday, at the Breakfast Club, we talked together & shared testimonies of how this living God was bringing about healing in our lives. And of course last Sunday at the all age service, it was all about '*Encountering the Risen Christ*'

And today we are going to carry on these themes. Today's message is going to be "Encountering the risen Jesus who transforms us"

And last week, in the all-age service, the children and the youth group & those leading did an amazing job of reminding us that we worship a living God, & are being guided by a risen savior – that this is not some set of religious rituals or rites that we are involved with here, but relationship with a living, loving God. To be a follower of Jesus is to be about relationship, not religion.

Last week it was clearly presented to us how the resurrection of Jesus transformed the disciples from frightened victims cowering in a locked room, to courageous, moving them from their sense of failure & loss to a place of strength & new hope, moving them from a place of confusion & lost-ness to being turned into men & women of steel who were galvanized by a new sense of purpose, calling & mission.

And here's the good news – the best news. The resurrection of Jesus will do the same for each of us.

If you can cast your mind back to the specifics of last week's service, you will remember that, among other things it touched on Mary, Thomas & Peter's experience of encountering the risen Jesus. Today we are going to do that again, and we are especially going to focus on what kind of people they were before the resurrection experience, and how much it changed them.

So first - we are going to listen now to the description from John's gospel of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus. Chapter 20 of John's gospel opens with Mary having gone to the tomb at dawn and found it empty. She runs to tell Peter & John, & they come running to also find that the tomb is

empty - but they are totally confused by that, & are unable to put the pieces together & work out what has happened.

Mary – John 20:10-18 – (Olivia reads)

What do we know about Mary Magdalene & her life prior to this? Well in two places, the gospels tell us that previously she had had this very dramatic encounter with Jesus in which he had healed her of the oppression caused by seven unclean spirits that were tormenting her. Very briefly in **Luke 8:2 & Mark 16:9** this is mentioned. Now the gospels don't tell us any more than that or what this meant for her. We don't know if this torment manifested itself as a physical illness, or psychological illness or what. But what we can imagine is that her life was pretty messed up before she met Jesus, and she was not in good place.

We can imagine that she is very much like the anonymous woman mentioned in Luke 7 who anoints Jesus' feet with her tears - & after Jesus assures her that her sins are forgiven, he makes the comment to the hard-hearted Pharisees who are watching & criticizing - That those who know they have been forgiven much, love much; while those who feel have been forgiven little, love little. And in Mary Magdalene's case, we can say that those who have been healed & delivered of much, love much. And we see this in Mary's incredible & courageous devotion to Jesus.

At the cross, when all the men had fled, Mary and the other women stay with Jesus till his bitter end. Mary is the first to come to the tomb looking for Jesus on that Easter Sunday, and according to John's gospel, the first human being to meet the risen Jesus, and the first human being to be given the commission to go & share this good news – firstly with the male disciples. For this reason, the early church used to refer to Mary as the Apostle to the Apostles. Now given the status of women in Jewish society of that day, or in fact of any society of that day, this was an incredibly privileged, authoritative role that had been given to her by God.

And when we look at this account in John 20 – what was Mary greatest need – what was she looking for & what was she needing? It looks to me that her hunger to see Jesus again, to touch Jesus again, to hear Jesus' voice again, was so great it over-came the fear that was keeping the other disciples in hiding.

And what happens to her when she encounters the risen Jesus? Well, she gets to hear more than just Jesus' voice – she gets to hear him call her by name. Notice that in the text, she doesn't recognize that it's Jesus till he calls her name – "Mary". And I think Jesus calls each of us by name too. He knows us & understands each of us with the same kind of intimacy and tenderness that he showed Mary here, and that's why we can trust him as we follow him. He knows us so intimately, even down to the numbers of hairs on our head.

As it says in **Psalm 139**

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.

You know my thoughts and are familiar with all my ways.

Before a word is even on my tongue you, Lord, know what it is going to be.

Now after the resurrection, & the spreading out of the disciples across the world to share the news of Jesus' resurrection with more & more people -it is uncertain where Mary Magdalene ended up, but the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox church is that she travelled to the people of Turkey where she proclaimed the good news.

Now after this appearance to Mary in John's account, we read that all the male disciples were gathered together, still in a locked room, still fearful of the Jewish leaders & the Roman authorities, fearful that they too might be arrested & crucified. Jesus appears to them, blessing them with his peace & mandating them to spread his message of forgiveness. But one disciple is missing from the room: Thomas – we don't know where he is – maybe he is so disillusioned he has almost given up – but what we do know that when the other disciples tell him what has happened to them - he refuses to believe it. Surely these people are delirious, or hallucinating – this can't be true. And here's what happens next:

Thomas – John 20:19-28 – (Kent reads)

Now what do we know from the gospels about Thomas, prior to this life changing event?

Well back in **John 11:16** there's a very interesting exchange – where Jesus tells them it's time to return to Jerusalem (or Bethany, which is just outside Jerusalem) in order to pray for Jesus' friend Lazarus who has been very sick & died. Now only a chapter earlier, the people in Jerusalem had picked up rocks to try & stone Jesus for blasphemy, & after that Jesus & the disciples had

retreated back into the country side across the Jordan. So they all know that Jerusalem is a very dangerous place for them right now, & and if they were prudent, they'd avoid it. And now in chapter 11, when Jesus says they are going back towards Jerusalem to pray for Lazarus – Thomas makes this very bleak, terse remark – *“Yes, let us go also, so we can die with him”* (John 11:16);

Now you could interpret that a few different ways, but to me it comes across as a kind of a quip coming out as almost black humour – almost cynical. But three chapters later, in John 14, we get a another glimpse of Thomas, straight after Jesus makes that very famous statement *“I am the way, the truth & the life & nobody comes to the Father but through me”* – in John 14:8 Thomas immediate responds with *“Lord, show us the Father, & that will be enough for us”*. So now we get this fuller picture of Thomas as someone who longs for a very direct encounter with God; but at the same time it needs to be personal & one on one, because he is not the kind of person who will believe things based on hear-say, or via other people's experiences or testimonies, & he is not the kind of person who believe things simply because others people believe them. Now as with Mary, Jesus knows exactly what Thomas needs, and how this encounter needs to be. And when he honours Thomas' questions & doubts by allowing him to touch his wounds - in that moment, Thomas falls on his knees & confesses – *you are Lord, you are God - & you are my Lord & my God.*

According to tradition & ancient sources, following this, around 50 AD, Thomas travels to India, to the southern states of Tamil Nadu & Kerela where he proclaimed the good news to the people of southern India, baptised converts and founded churches, before eventually being martyred in that place. And indeed today there are still churches in southern India who call themselves St Thomas Christians and who trace their history back to this apostle. So, like Mary, through this encounter with the risen Jesus, Thomas is transformed, and his life becomes filled with the desire to share the reality of Jesus' resurrection far & wide.

In John's gospel, after this encounter with Thomas, we read that the a few days later the disciples have decide to go back fishing – so clearly they are feeling less fearful, and the practical need to resume working & getting some income in & some food has kicked in. Jesus appears on the shore of the lake – but initially they don't realise its him. Then he calls Peter to throw the fishing net back in the water one more time, & they catch this huge haul of fish, so many that the net threatens to break. Jesus then calls them onto the shore to

eat breakfast together, where this dramatic conversation between Peter & Jesus then unfolds:

Peter – John 21:15-19 - (Nigel reads)

Now, far more than either Mary or Thomas, we know what kind of person Peter was prior to the resurrection – impulsive and inconsistent – up & down, high & low, full-on & then faltering. When they first met, Jesus had changed his name from Simon (the reed or grass stem – pliable & shifting with the wind) to Peter, the rock – solid, strong & reliable. But Peter needed time to grow into this identity, and everything that is happening to him, but especially the hard times, are helping him grow into that identity. And it's the same for us – Jesus is calling us to become more like him, & for us to grow in character, & God will use (if we let him) all our circumstances to shape us & make us into the people he wants us to be – but he will particularly use our hard times to do that (if we let him).

But here in John 21, the most immediate spiritual & emotional issue for Peter was that he needed to be forgiven & released from his failure & betrayal of Jesus during the arrest & trial, when he denied three times that he even knew Jesus. After having said to Jesus *“I am ready to follow you to prison and to death if necessary”*, he can't even find the courage to acknowledge that he knows Jesus when challenged on it.

As we've seen with Mary & Thomas, Jesus knows what each person needs - & he does not deal with Peter's sense of failure & betrayal by saying a simple *“your sins are forgiven, go in peace”* as he has to several people in the gospels earlier - but instead he leads Peter through an encounter that you'd have to describe as therapeutic & even cathartic. Jesus asks him three times to reaffirm his love & commitment to Jesus, one time for each of his denials, and three times Peter is given a commission & call to lead & feed God's people.

A cathartic process is one that leads us to emotional release or spiritual healing, & that's what is happening here. Peter is being lifted up & restored again, & being commissioned to be both a shepherd & a fisherman for Jesus. And it's like a full circle – remember, when Jesus 1st met Peter in Mark's gospel, he's casting his net into the lake, & Jesus says *“come follow me, & I will make you a fisher of people”*.

Symbolically, by following Jesus instructions, he has just caught 153 actual fish, and in about one month, on the day of Pentecost, he will pull in some 3,000 new believers when he stands up & proclaims the Good News on that day. He could not have done what he does on the day of Pentecost without what is happening here at the end of John's gospel. Here in John 21 Peter receives a call that will require great courage - to follow in the very footsteps of Jesus, even to suffer as Jesus suffered. This was a hard & high calling Peter was receiving. In fact it's all getting a bit heavy, and almost in desperation in the next few verses on from what Nigel read us, Peter glances up at the beloved disciple, who we take to be John who's writing this gospel – *“and what about him”* to which Jesus replies, essentially – *‘don't worry about what it is I'm calling him to do – but you – follow me’*

As we read through the book of Acts, we read of a Peter growing in courage, in character & in leadership. And of course he writes two pastoral letters which are part of our New Testament. In those letters he testifies to the power of the resurrection in his life: in 1 Peter 1:3 he writes – *“in his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead”* and in terms of the character stuff that he's growing into he says *“prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled & set your hope fully on the grace to be given to you”* (1 Peter 1:13). In fact, as you read through his two letters the character virtue of self-control comes up frequently, probably because it's something he himself has wrestled with for so long. The most necessary step in leadership is self-leadership: we can never lead others further or deeper than we have gone ourselves. Some of the primary areas Peter needed to grow in were in overcoming his impulsiveness, flightiness & inconsistency.

And after the book of Acts closes, history teaches us that Peter proclaimed the gospel across the Roman Empire, until he was arrested sentenced to die by crucifixion in Rome in 68AD. And tradition has it he was not only crucified, but that he asked to be crucified upside down, as he didn't consider himself worthy to be crucified in the same way that had Jesus had been crucified.

So Peter, Thomas & Mary – all three of the characters we have looked at this morning – were people radically changed & transformed by the resurrection, and by encountering the risen Christ.

But it's not just their story is it – it's our story too. When we too meet this risen Jesus, our lives will be transformed. We have seen how these disciples were

transformed from cowering to courageous, from an overwhelming sense of failure & loss to a place of strength & new hope, from a place of confusion & lost-ness to being turned into men & women galvanized by a new sense of purpose, calling & mission.

And it is the same for each of us – God has a call on each of our lives. It is a call to grow in character and become more like the Jesus we follow. It's a call to vocation, because there are things that Jesus has created each of us to do that only we can do, and if we won't do them they won't get done.

As **Ephesians 2:10** says, *we are God's work of art, created to do works he planned in advance for us to do.* As **2 Timothy 1:9** says, *he has saved us & called us with a holy calling.* We have been created for & to do special things, and to be a channel through which the Kingdom of God can come here on earth & into people's lives.

This is such a great privilege. But it is also be hard, and it also takes courage. Jesus will call us to do difficult & challenging things. And many times, when the going gets tough, we will be tempted to look around and compare our work with other people's work, and our work with other people's work or calling, & feel jealous because theirs is more glamorous, or because it looks easier, or bigger or brighter or whatever. But the word Jesus spoke to Peter, he speaks to each of us as well. *Don't you worry about what I've called them to do, you just keep putting one foot in front of another & stay faithful, & stay obedient, & keep following me.*

I'm guessing among these three characters there's one that feels most like you. Maybe Mary, & her need to hear Jesus say her name, to be reminded how much he loved her, & how much healing he had bought into her life already? Thomas, the rational, analytical thinker who craved a direct, visceral encounter with God? Or Peter, who's made some terrible mistakes, and who needs to be restored and know he's forgiven, and given a second chance to become the person God has called them to be?

Whichever of these you relate to, or if it's something quite unique compared to them, one thing is the same. God knows you intimately and tenderly, and knows what you need. Cry out to him, and wait for his response.

