

THE UPPER ROOM

By: Les Baird

At: St James' Church, Lower Hutt; All Saints' Church, Belmont Domain.

On: 2nd Sunday in Easter, 8th April 2018.

About: John 20: 19-31

On the road

There was a small group of men, 13 of them to be exact, and a little group of women, who had set out walking that day, a little hikoi, you might think. They were heading to Jerusalem. But it wasn't really a happy group. There seemed to be some dissatisfaction with the leadership - isn't there always! And perhaps there was some justification for that. Because Jesus was taking them back to Jerusalem, where an attempt had already been made to stone him, where he had been threatened with death. They didn't want that to happen to him, but of course, they were scared for their own lives too. The gospel writer Mark captures the tension of their situation in these words... ³²“They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.”

One of them, though, one called Thomas whom we've not heard from before, sums up their thoughts and feelings in these words “let us all go along with the teacher so that we may die with him!”



Surviving

Move on a week, and there are the same men - except that now there are only 10 of them, and they are not walking the road, they are shut up in a room with the door locked. Jesus is not there, Jesus their leader has indeed been put to death by the Jews. One of the followers, the disciple John was there at the cross to see that scene, to see that incredibly frightening, totally demoralising, ambition-killing, purpose-destroying event. Another, Judas, betrayed Jesus to the authorities, set him firmly on the path that led to his being crucified, and then, perhaps in despair, remorse, fear, we don't know what emotion was uppermost in his mind when he took his own life.

Thomas, the outspoken one, was also absent, though we are given no information about why.

As for the remaining 10, they remain afraid, bewildered, behind locked doors because they are afraid of the Jewish authorities. Yet there must be some expectation growing, surely, a sense that something beyond their understanding was developing. Two of them, Peter and John, had gone to Jesus' tomb at the urging of one of the women, Mary Magdalene. She had gone to the tomb early to attend to the grave where Jesus' body had been laid, and she had found that his body was not there. Peter and John also, could not locate the body of Jesus, and they returned to the others understandably bewildered.

Surprised



But then, the totally unexpected happened. Mary came and told them that she had actually met with Jesus, spoken with him, touched him. This was news that must have been somewhat difficult to deal with, despite the hope that lay within it. It hardly prepared them for the next event, which was an encounter with Jesus himself. Despite the doors still being closed, Jesus himself was there with them. He confirmed his identity by showing them the marks of his ordeal on his body. He restored purpose

to their bewildered hearts and minds with the words “as my Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” And he equipped them for their task by giving them the Holy Spirit.

John’s description here of the giving of the Holy Spirit in person, by the risen Christ, to the assembled Apostles may seem less dramatic, but no less significant than the event described in Acts chapter 2, the giving of the Spirit which we particularly remember in our Pentecost services, when the Spirit coming with both wind and fire, impelled Peter to proclaim the resurrection to a large crowd. The association of the Spirit with wind or breath, clearly makes a link to the Old Testament understanding of God’s Spirit, represented by the Hebrew word “ruach”, meaning breath. Thus, it is the Spirit which has always carried out God’s purposes in our world, and still does.

It has long seemed to me that the early Christians were slow to understand that this Spirit, God’s Holy Spirit, was available to all believers at all times. In reading the story of the early church in the book of Acts, in reading the letters that St Paul wrote to that early church, this understanding gradually developed - that the Spirit was being given, not just in association with particular events, but as a lively force always present in Christian believers.

Sceptical

If you were following my totting up the roll-call of the disciples, you would realise that one is still missing. Thomas was not there when Jesus appeared to the others. And when he returned, he was sceptical. Who could blame him? Not only was he being told



that a man they knew to have been crucified had come and met with them - come and eaten with them - not only was that incredible, but it seemed to be so much in line with what these shocked, distressed and fearful men would want to believe, that Thomas must have felt that he had a right to raise questions, to be cynical. He set out what he saw as a reasonable standard of belief - not just to see someone claiming to be

Jesus come to life, but to see the actual wounds that would have resulted from the crucifixion.

Notice then, what happens. Thomas doesn't see a vision of Jesus when he is alone in his bed, with nobody to verify his story. What happens is that Jesus appears again to the assembled group of disciples when Thomas is there with them.

In his first appearance to the disciples in the locked room, Jesus affirmed his humanity, his reality, by taking food with them - we read that in Chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel. In his second appearance, Jesus affirms his identity by showing all of them the marks of his crucifixion. This is too much for Thomas who is now willing to accept the appearance of Jesus at face value, and he responds in the words of awe and adoration, "my Lord and my God."

Believing

Our faith, our Christianity, is unrelentingly about the supernatural. There is something in each of us that wants to fight with that. Perhaps for us who have grown up in the age of science, of technology, of cosmic mathematics, it is perhaps even harder than it was for people of past eras.

We may well imagine that it was for us that Jesus was thinking when he said "blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed."

The Apostle John, who himself saw the risen Jesus on more than one occasion, tells us at the end of today's reading, that he wrote these words down in the book we call John's gospel, "so that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, we may have life in his name."

I conclude with the words, recorded in Mark chapter 9, of a man who came to Jesus seeking help for his sick child, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

