

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 21st April 2019

Luke 24: 1 - 12

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

You'll probably remember the Monty Python film that caused some controversy back in 1979 called, *The Life of Brian*¹. The film invents a fictional character called Brian whose life brilliantly and memorably satirises the Gospel stories about the life of Jesus. If you saw it, do you remember how the film ends?

It ends with that famous song, *Always look on the bright side of life*², sung by Brian and two criminals on their crosses. The film ends its satirical look at the Gospels with that scene of the crucifixion, but of course we who know the Gospel story well, know that this ending is too soon. In the Gospels, the ending of the story about Jesus isn't the crucifixion, but the Resurrection. So, I was wondering what the portrayal of that scene – the Resurrection – would have looked like in the hands of the Monty Python team.

If I was writing it I imagine that following the crucifixion scene, there could be another scene in which Brian's followers wake up early in the morning, and go to the tomb in which Brian had been laid to anoint Brian following his death on the cross. But, when they arrive at the tomb, they discover that the stone has been rolled away, they look in, and the tomb is empty. Suddenly, in this satirical reimagining of the Gospel story, there are two people beside them demanding to know what they are doing at this tomb, and who they are looking for. The person that this tomb is meant for, they say, isn't dead, but is still alive.

In the background, unseen by Brian's followers, and jumping up and down, raging, as she did throughout most of the *Life of Brian*, is Brian's mother. She is standing outside a different tomb, a closed one, shouting in the way she did throughout most of the film, 'You're at the wrong tomb! His body is in here! That's the wrong tomb!' From that simple misunderstanding - Brian's followers went to the wrong tomb - a worldwide faith could have been born. I think that would have been very funny.

I'm not the first person to imagine this scene and to write about it; the first person to imagine this scene wasn't me or the Monty Python team, it was Luke, the Gospel writer. We know this because he makes reference to it in the Gospel passage that immediately precedes the passage we read. He tells us that following Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea approached Pilate, asked for the body of Jesus, took it down from the cross, wrapped it in a linen sheet, and laid it in a tomb. As he was doing this, Luke says this,

The women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee followed; they took note of the tomb and observed how his body was laid. Then they went home... But on the Sunday morning very early they came to the tomb... Finding the stone had been rolled away... they went inside; but the body was not to be found.

¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079470/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHPOzQzk9Qo>

The problem that the early church had when it preached about Jesus' resurrection was that, the simplest explanation for the body not being there when the women went to anoint it, was not that the dead had been raised, but that the women who went to the tomb early on that first Easter morning, had simply made a mistake. They had gone to the wrong tomb, people said, an unused and empty one.

To counter this accusation, Luke makes sure that his account of the Resurrection records, precisely, the fact that when Joseph placed Jesus in the tomb, the women had followed him there, and had taken note of which tomb Joseph had laid Jesus in. By so doing, Luke asserts that when they went back in the morning a few days later, they knew which tomb to go to, they didn't make a mistake, and it was definitely empty.

The way that Luke recounts this Resurrection story reminds us that no one – in any of the Gospels – witnessed the Resurrection itself. Instead of witnessing the Resurrection, Luke tells us that those who were Jesus' friends and who knew him and loved him, only saw him crucified; buried in a tomb; and when they returned to the tomb, it was empty.

Luke doesn't write that the women witnessed the Resurrection itself, but only that the women went to the tomb where, he says, 'the body was not to be found,' that is to say, it was lost. The two angelic men ask, 'Why are you searching for the living amongst the dead?' On that first Easter morning in the empty tomb, the women felt that they had lost Jesus, and consequently they were searching for him.

What Luke is describing here - death, burial, loss and searching - is a very accurate description of bereavement. When someone dies and is buried, those who loved that person often report experiencing an overwhelming feeling of loss, a feeling that they have literally lost something that is very dear and important to them. Often, this feeling of overwhelming loss is accompanied by an equally overwhelming desire to search for the person who has died, even if the bereaved know full well that their loved one has gone for good.

Following the story of the Resurrection Luke recounts stories of Jesus appearing to those who loved him, speaking to them, walking with them. Bereaved people, physically and emotionally exhausted, often experience the sense that they have encountered their loved-one post-mortem; perhaps they heard his or her footsteps, or smelt him or her, or quite commonly saw her or him. People even recount *conversations* they have had with their loved-one in the days, weeks and months following the funeral.

What's more, in the book that Luke wrote following his Gospel, the Book of Acts, Luke describes the way that those who were closest to Jesus, who loved him most, eventually rose up out of their grief with the conviction that despite his crucifixion and his death, nevertheless, life must go on.

In this passage that we read this morning in which no one witnessed the actual Resurrection, Luke is describing to us the actions and the feelings of a group of people who were experiencing the pain and the loss of bereavement; a group of hurting people who had just lost their friend whom they loved deeply, and who were experiencing in that moment profound and deep grief.

We shouldn't forget that, for grief is no laughing matter. No wonder Luke writes, just as Mark writes in his Gospel, and just as Matthew writes in his, that on that first Easter morning, when they looked in to the empty tomb, the women were terrified.

No one witnessed the Resurrection; no wonder, it is not possible to witness the Resurrection because resurrection is not resuscitation. The dead body of Jesus not only was never found, it was not resuscitated either. An example of resuscitation taking place in the Gospels, would be Lazarus; Lazarus was resuscitated. As for Jesus on that first Easter morning, and in the days and weeks following, there was no body found, dead or resuscitated.

Instead, these terrified, grieving people believed that following his death they had encountered their friend, their teacher, their Master, their Lord, their Messiah. They encountered him in a way that was unrecognisable to them. He appeared to them, transformed.

For example, some of those disciples walked alongside him for miles before they realised it was him. Others thought he was a gardener until he spoke to them. Others, like Thomas, were able to touch his body, but this body was a body that could walk through walls. Others, who were fishing on the Sea of Galilee, saw him, talked to him, but didn't know it was him until he reminded them of what he had first done for them on that lake years before. After his resurrection, when his disciples encountered him, they did not recognise him – in some way he was transformed.

Out of all of this love, and loss, and pain, and terror, and as a consequence of these encounters those who had known Jesus during his lifetime came to believe - not to know for certain, but to believe - that somehow the life of the man they loved, whom they had followed from Galilee to Jerusalem and who had died, had passed through death, and now he continued to live.

He had been crucified, he had been buried, the tomb was empty, the body was gone, there was no resuscitation, instead he had been transformed, resurrected; he lived. So, after death, they concluded, in some way, life must go on.

But how? How, following all that they had experienced was life to go on? Well, what these grieving friends did was, they returned not just to the place where they first met him, Galilee, but to the words he had spoken to them just before he had been arrested, and to the actions that he had performed on the night of his arrest.

Just before he had been arrested, they remembered that he had commanded them to do three things, and they also remembered that when they encountered him after his death, he had commanded them to do a fourth.

The three things that he asked them to do on the night of his arrest were: to eat together sharing bread and wine in memory of him; to wash each other's feet in service of each other; and to love each other as he had loved them. The fourth thing that he commanded them to do when they encountered him, resurrected and transformed, after his death, was to tell his story, and to do that and the other three things he commanded them to do everywhere they went – to the ends of the earth.

And that is what they did, in their grief, and their pain and amidst their terror, they came together, they ate together, they served one another, and they performed acts of love in the way he had done in the world for them. It wasn't easy, bereavement never is. These things proved difficult to do, and they became steadily more difficult as they told his story and as more and more people joined their community of fellowship, service and love, to worship him, their Lord and Master, who had laid down these commandments and his life in obedience to God's will.

It wasn't easy, but the doing of these things changed everything; the doing of them transformed their lives. As they told the story everywhere they went, and as they did these things with whomever joined them, they found that the world was also transformed around them, slowly, bit by bit, until, 2,000 years later and 5,000 miles away it transforms our lives and our world.

On this Easter morning, you haven't witnessed the Resurrection, just as those first disciples didn't witness the Resurrection. But I want you to believe just as they believed. I want you to believe: believe that they went to the right tomb; believe that when they looked inside, the tomb was empty; believe that two men in dazzling raiment told them that life goes on; believe that no matter how hard they searched for it, they never found the body, dead or resuscitated; believe that on that day and in the days following they encountered their friend, their Lord and Master, transformed resurrected; believe, as they did, that you too can experience transformation in this world and the next; believe that what matters now is that we who have followed this man from his birth to his death and beyond do four things: share fellowship with one another; perform acts of service for each other; and love one another, as he loved those first followers; and finally to do these three things out in the world, with everyone, and to the ends of the earth. If we do this, then his life will be vindicated, despite his death, and it will be resurrected in this world of ours today, so to transform it and us with the power of his love, his mercy, his justice and his peace.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.