

## Sermon for Easter 3 (Year B)

### The Text: Luke 24:36-48

Do the words of today's Gospel reading sound familiar: "Jesus himself stood among them and said to them: 'Peace be with you'"? If that sounds familiar it is probably because we heard these same words last Sunday in the Gospel reading from John 20. The context of that passage was twofold. First, it was the evening of Jesus' resurrection; the first Easter day. Second, John also progresses to a week later, when the risen Jesus again appears to his disciples the following Sunday. It makes sense, then, for a reading that focuses on events the week after Jesus' resurrection to be used in church the week after Easter Sunday.

But the context of today's Gospel reading from Luke is back on Easter day again. Before today's actual passage, the women go to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body but find his body missing, the risen Jesus walks with two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus before he reveals himself to them in the breaking of the bread, they return to Jerusalem and find the eleven and those with them, and tell them what has happened. While they were talking about this, we are brought to the beginning of today's text where we hear the same words we heard in John last week: that Jesus himself stood among them and said: "Peace be with you."

We seem to be going backwards to the first Easter Sunday. Shouldn't it be time to move on to something else? After all we know the Easter story well; maybe even too well. Every year that we celebrate Easter we become a little more familiar with it. Maybe the risk is to be so familiar with it that we do start to think of it as a story like those we might have read to our children, and don't stop to reflect on the depth of the reality of what took place for us.

It is hard for us who are separated by thousands of years and thousands of kilometres to comprehend what that first Easter was really like for those disciples. It was an anxious enough time for them as it is, with the authorities promising the same fate to anyone who declared allegiance to Jesus and confessed him to be the Christ. Last week John told us that the disciples had gathered under the cover of darkness with the doors locked. So just imagine how startled and frightened they would have been when all of a sudden Jesus came and stood among them, hearts racing and throats dry, utterly confused about what was happening, thinking they had seen a ghost.

But it is not a ghost there with them; it is Jesus. He holds out his hands and points to his feet to show them the punctures in his flesh from where the nails were driven through to the wood of the Cross. "It is I myself!" He says. "Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." Just imagine being there, right in front of Jesus! What would you do? Perhaps you might slowly and cautiously reach out with your trembling hand, touching the hand of your Maker and Redeemer. As you make contact you feel the same human flesh that you have. Imagine the blur of emotions the disciples must have felt and all the thoughts running through their mind—one moment

gripping fear, the next joy and amazement because it seems too good to be true. But it is true! This is Jesus with them. He has actually, bodily risen. He physically eats some fish, right there with them. The crucified Jesus is now the risen, crucified Jesus!

Easter is not just a story—it is real. God didn't turn from pain and suffering, injustice, grief, and brokenness but in Christ he faced it and fully absorbed it. Those wounds the risen Christ showed his disciples are real. They encompass everything he endured: his betrayal and handing over to be crucified, the horrific depths of injustice; all the mocking and spitting, the ridicule and bullying, the abuse and brutality, the emotional torment and physical pain and the anguish of being God-forsaken that Jesus suffered. His wounds encompass the grief of a mother losing her son and the fear of those who loved Jesus being persecuted themselves. They are bottomless holes in which all the disciples' own failings are hidden: the doubts about what Jesus said, the public denial of him. They are wounds that absorb their squabbling about who would be the greatest, their lack of faith, their incomprehension of his ministry and unreliability in it, the rebuke of Jesus when he revealed his mission and of going to the Cross, their inability to stay awake and keep watch with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and keep watch, their denial of him, their inability to recognize him after his resurrection and their unbelief of the women's testimony on Easter morning.

How deep their fright and fear must have been...not only to see Jesus but then to fear what he might say to them. We share in the same failings and inadequacies of the disciples. We know too well the reality of guilt and shame as Satan comes to attack us with the fiercest of condemnations. It's an intolerable burden and try as we might all the self-justifications and blaming others and even God—and relabelling what we've done or failed to do—doesn't take that experience of gnawing guilt away.

Although Satan is overcome by Christ's victory, he tries to do whatever damage he can with the limited opportunity he has until Christ returns to make all things new. The devil tempts us to go against God's word, and even to decide what that word is, thereby denying Christ rather than ourselves.

If we're honest, we've seen that in the 14 days since Easter Sunday in our family arguments, or when we lose our patience with others, maybe even our brothers and sisters in the congregation. In fact it's often in the congregation we know this most acutely, when we hurt others and they hurt us, because we have judged a matter that is important to them as trivial to us. We can become fixed on what we see in front of us and dismiss what others see around us. We might work harder at preserving our pride than preserving love, which overshadows the desire to gladly hear and learn God's word and the desire to serve others. We might talk of the church and its worship in terms of consumer language; what we have a right to and how our needs should be met, as if God doesn't know how to meet human needs. It's 14 days since we celebrated Easter, but the secret thoughts and attitudes of the heart are still there. We still sin, we still have guilt, we still need peace.

The devil loves nothing more than to lead us into temptation and then heap condemnation and guilt upon us when we fall. Then, having fallen, he drives us to look inwardly on how to justify ourselves. But we can't justify ourselves. It isn't what we do or say but what Christ does and says that makes us right with God and brings us divine peace. That's why we need to hear the same words from last week all over again: on the first Easter day as Jesus came and stood among them and said: "Peace be with you". Like the disciples, we also acutely know that we need God's forgiveness and peace. Jesus came to bring the benefits of his death and resurrection to his disciples personally by telling them in four short words that their past failings are not held against them and they are in a right standing before God: "Peace be with you."

If only we could go to that house where the disciples were and see Jesus too and hear his words. Was this experience just for the disciples and the women at the tomb and the 500 people he appeared to? If only we could go back there, somehow. Maybe that's why the Lectionary compilers take us back to the first Easter three weeks in a row—because we can't go back there. There is no going back, some 2,000 years ago to Jerusalem so far away.

But in Christ, God has brought Easter to us. We received and share in all of the benefits of Christ's saving death and resurrection when we were baptised into his death and resurrection, and the one true God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, put his name on us so that we are his very own dear children who belong to him forever.

That is why we can rejoice with the apostle John and say: "See what love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!" God lavished his love on us in Jesus his Son, who is with us, in our lying down in the evening and our rising in the morning. He is with us when we eat breakfast, lunch and tea (whether that's broiled fish or not). He is with us in our work place, at our school, in our study course. He is with us while we wait in the doctor's surgery. He is with us while we wait for test results, or as we lie in hospital. He is with us as we travel, with us in our leisure. He is with us in our fears and trials. He is with us even though others sin against us. He is with us as others help us, and with us in our helping of others too. And in church he is with us here in a special way for a particular purpose that he is nowhere else. The risen Christ is here to meet with us and bless us, bestowing divine peace upon us.

We can't go back to that house where Jesus opened the minds of his disciples to understand the scriptures, so Jesus comes here for us every Sunday as he leads us through the liturgy, as we listen to the readings, as we hear the proclaimed word. The repentance and forgiveness of sins that will be preached in Christ's name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem, has even made it all the way to us here. We can't go back to the house the disciples were in some 2,000 years ago to hear Jesus proclaim peace...so the risen Christ comes in our time, in this space, to this house. He stands among us, his baptised people: "Peace be with you".

Amen.