

Sermon by Rev Elizabeth Richardson
30th April 2017 – Wesley – Easter 3

Imagine being one of a church group just a few decades after Jesus had died. One or two members of your home church were literate so it was up to them to read the scriptures to the rest. Everyone listened attentively to the words - written, in this case, by Luke.

You would have heard quite a sizeable portion of the gospel in one sitting and so you heard how Jesus and his disciples had shared a meal together in an upper room. The reading continued through the events of that night and on to the crucifixion and the laying of the body of Jesus in a tomb provided by a wealthy follower.

Then followed the amazing story of how the women close to Jesus had found he had risen and hurried to tell the other disciples. Luke's story went on to tell of the two disciples walking along the Road to Emmaus. The Last supper in the Upper Room had been memorable – none could forget how Jesus broke the bread, saying words we use today in Holy Communion and then three days later the two disciples walking away from Jerusalem invited the stranger who joined them to stay for a meal at an inn. This stranger broke bread in such a similar way that the disciples immediately recognised him as Jesus. Jesus disappeared but what did those disciples do? Did they get a good night's sleep and then continue on their way? NO, they hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others. The women were right. Jesus WAS alive.

That urge to immediately pass on the good news led to the growth of what later became the church. Jesus had been a great force in their lives. Not just the 12 inner circle of disciples but the large group of followers too. Then it had all seemed to come to an end. Jesus was dead. Their hopes for a better future were over. But within a day or two came reports of Jesus alive and meeting with various ones.

Now, let us look at Jesus. He was raised from the dead. The male disciples had gone to ground, afraid of the consequences of being linked to him – afraid of suffering a similar fate. But look at Jesus – he deliberately sought out those frightened people. He went to the trouble of finding them hiding in closed rooms or walking well away from Jerusalem. He let them know that he still valued them, loved them and counted on them to remain faithful.

After that it was up to the disciples to carry on the work Jesus had done. But, how could they, flawed human beings, be up to the task? And yet, enough of them worked hard at it and overcame difficulties and kept on learning and doing until they truly were great leaders. Leaders who could convince many others of the value of turning their lives around, changing their ways of thinking and being baptised as followers of Jesus. Luke wrote up the story of the early church in an account we now know as the book of Acts.

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So, what do we learn from this story? We can learn that Jesus does not give us up as a bad job. Jesus said that after he ascended to heaven, we would not be alone because the Spirit would be with us. God, Jesus and the Spirit, together the Trinity, are interested in us, each one of us. Whatever our fears, or troubles we can ask for help. When we read the stories of Jesus and of the early church we learn just what the message of Jesus was. We learn that it matters very much how we live our lives.

Just look around the world today. Think of bullying and how it is in the news. Have we ever been caught up in poor behaviour because it is that or lose our jobs?

Some things happening in the world today seem overwhelmingly difficult – There is a famine starting to take hold in sub-Saharan Africa. Any of you who get mailings from the various overseas aid agencies will have received images of suffering people. And then there is war. Anzac Day was last Tuesday and we remind ourselves of the horrors of war yet we are still sending young people to war in far off countries and our news tells of heightened fears around North Korea.

On Easter day, Ockert reminded us that back in Jesus' day, the world was a fearful place. But if we let fear dominate us then it imprisons us. The two disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, overcame fear and hurried back to Jerusalem to be with the other disciples and tell them the good news of their meeting.

More and more told of the great good news. And so, in our reading from Acts, we learnt that 3,000 repented and were baptised. Repenting means much more than feeling sorry. It means changing our lives, turning around and living in a different way. And so baptism of those who have truly turned their lives around is profound. Of course we make mistakes just as the first disciples made mistakes. It takes a lifetime to learn just how Jesus wanted people to live but, bit by bit, we learn from our mistakes and our lives change.

The English theologian, N.T.Wright, has written a book titled "After you believe: why Christian character matters". In this he writes of virtue and the importance of working at making virtue a matter of course in our lives. He gives the example of Captain Sullenberger, the pilot of the airbus which lost power in both engines and landed on the Hudson River in New York city. As Wright says, that was not a time to consult manuals as to what to do. It was very much a time to be so skilled and so well trained, that much of what he did came automatically. That level of skill takes years to develop. It is the same with many things in life including our characters.

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When we are young children, we are taught to say thank you, not to lie, to play together with others and so on. Our parents remind us until we get the message. As we grow older, deeper issues take a lot of thinking through.

Wright looks at how many people, including Christians, have come to believe that it is important to be true to ourselves. That is based on the idea that deep within each one of us there is a spark which will take precedence over everything else. More simply, it is put as My heart is telling me how it is and I must go with my heart. (p54). This links in with the idea of freedom to do as we wish. Then it is assumed that if we continue to operate in this way we will live morally good lives. But the trouble with all of this is that bad behaviour also has such origins and can become habit forming. There is not sufficient hard work involved in this sort of life. Wright says that “we urgently need to recapture the New Testament’s vision of a genuinely ‘good’ human life as a life of *character formed by God’s promised future*,” (p57).

Following Jesus does not stop at baptism or confirmation. Being a Christian means regularly reflecting on our actions and thoughts. Are they in line with what Jesus taught. Are they in the spirit of what God expects of us. If not, then we have to change our ways. We have to maintain our connection with God through prayer, just as Jesus did. That is how we grow in faith - and growing in faith is a life long task.

We might start out as rather unpromising material for God, but think of Peter. He made many mistakes and wrong assumptions while Jesus was alive and afterwards. He continued to struggle to learn just what was important and how to lead others and form the first church. Eventually, Peter became a great Christian leader.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, people have practiced their faith, they have worked hard at it and some have achieved the depth of faith and virtue that they are recognised by all around as truly good and faithful Christians.

Jesus encourages each one of us to work at developing a strong virtuous character.

Amen.

Elizabeth Richardson