

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

Easter Day 3



15 April 2018

Acts 3:12-19

1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36b-48

Misunderstandings are common in Church. One hospital chaplain in England wrote down some of the replies he'd had to the question. "Would you like Holy Communion?"

One man said: "No thanks, I'm Episcopalian."

Another said: "No thanks, I asked for cornflakes."

And a third said: "No thanks, I've never been circumcised."

All signs of creeping secularization I suppose. There was an article in a satirical newspaper called *Private Eye*, which was headed: 'GOD TO LEAVE CHURCH OF ENGLAND'. What it said was this:

"Following the example set by leading former Anglicans, God has indicated that he too is to leave the Church of England. Friends of God believe the current issues troubling the church to have been behind the Almighty's sudden decision to convert to Rome. According to sources close to God, he's been unhappy for some time with the direction the Anglican Church has been taking and has now finally had enough. A Church of England spokesman said: 'Losing God is a bit of a blow, but it's just something we're going to have to learn to live with.'"

In the fall of 1984, I spent two months in North India staying with a Bishop there. It was amazing and exhausting, not least because everyone you went to visit wanted to feed you. I did 20 visits in one day once, eating at each house, and then the person who had been taking us round proceeded to take us back to his house for dinner!

It was just at the time when the academic David Jenkins was appointed to be Bishop of Durham. He was widely reported as saying that the resurrection was "a conjuring trick with bones". This led to many concerned questions for me and my fellow theological student who was travelling with me. "We hear the English Bishops have stopped believing in the resurrection?" they said. "Is this true?" they asked. There were a genuine sadness and concern in these questions. The British brought Anglicanism to India after all, and now, so it seemed, they no longer believed in its central tenet. The fact that, three days after his consecration, York Minister was struck by lightning resulting in a very destructive fire only served to fuel the gleeful press coverage of the controversy. Nobody thought to suggest that if God was angry at the Bishop of Durham, why it was that Durham Cathedral didn't get hit!

To be fair to Bishop Jenkins, he was partly miss-understood. What he actually said was that the resurrection was “not a conjuring trick with bones”. He argued that, in his words, "it was not a single event, but a series of experiences that gradually convinced people that Jesus's life, power, purpose, and personality were actually continuing.”

It is perhaps an example of the fact that what is fine for a lecturer in a theological faculty to say in the course of academic debate and exploration is not at all fine for a Bishop to say. Theologians are there to explore and debate, Bishops are there to defend the faith and encourage the faithful. As St. Paul says, “If the trumpet maketh an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for the battle.” The Indians I was with were hearing a very uncertain sound indeed.

“And when Jesus had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.”

Why is the physicality of the resurrection important? Why does John take such care to describe the wounds of the risen Christ and this detail that he asked for and ate the piece of fish? Why does Luke do the same in his Gospel?

If we think of people who have profoundly influenced us, our parents perhaps, or someone we knew who are no longer with us, then we know that they can still influence us even though they are dead. I can pretty much say what my Father or Mother would say about most things that happen to me. I know what they believed and valued and those things still deeply influence me. In a sense, they are still with me; built into me and my life but they are not here. I experience them as a distant presence that is profoundly somewhere else. Yes, I believe they are there but they are not here in this life. It is only in my many memories that I experience them.

Many great leaders who are long dead still influence the world in this way. Their words are there to be read. Their ideas there to be shared. Their example there to be followed. George Washington, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the list is long. We each no doubt have our own lists and yet, there is a fundamental difference between them and Jesus. No one has ever claimed to experience the living presence of George Washington or Gandhi, at least not to my knowledge. They are the honored dead. Greatly honored, but, aside from the record of their words and deeds, they are long gone except in blessed memory.

The first disciples experienced the risen Christ, not as a ghost or a memory or a dream. They touched him. He ate with them. How can this be? no one can say, but it sure does explain why millions of people down the centuries have described Jesus as being present in a way that no one else who has ever died is present? He is risen. Even though he is not present as he was immediately after the resurrection he is alive in the world in a way that no historical figure, however, influential, ever could be.

People are sometimes prepared to die for a cause or an idea, but they are never prepared to die for the

dead person who had the idea. Many people died in the cause of freedom in the American Revolution but no one ever died for George Washington per se. Christians, including most of those who were there in that upper room were and are prepared to die, not for an idea, but for Christ. Why? Because we experience his risen life and person here and now. We know him as the way the truth and the life.

Resurrection, like the incarnation, is physical. It is not just an idea. As some of us will hear later on today at our Founders Day Luncheon, Christ Church, this congregation, was borne on the wave of the experience of resurrection in individual lives.

Our founders were driven by that experience. Francis Scott Key thought very earnestly about ordination. At the age of 29 Thomas Corcoran left his life behind him in Ireland and came here just seven years after the American Revolution to begin a completely new life. Many years later his son, William Corcoran, who gave the great north stained glass window at Christ Church in memory of his father looked back on his life. It was a long life that had included a financial collapse from which he had to struggle back from over some years to become the very wealthy man he was. At 85 he said “of all my money, that which I have given away is all that is truly mine.”

Judge James Sewell recounted how he found the risen Christ when he was converted as a thoughtless, irreligious man, by a dream of the last Judgment. So vivid was it that he rose from his bed and began to pray. For some days he prayed without ceasing until he found peace in believing.

We also see this same experience of the risen Christ at the heart of the first Rector Reul Keith's resignation letter in 1820:

"The church... will not be deserted by the Lord... No. It is, we humbly trust, built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone. It is cemented with the tears and prayers of some of His most faithful and devoted people. He will never leave it, nor forsake it."

He will never leave it because he is actually here, in the sacrament of bread and wine in the Eucharist, in the life witness and service of the congregation and in the prayers, experience and lives of each one of us.

David Jenkins was not wrong when he said that the resurrection “was not a single event, but a series of experiences.” We do experience resurrection in many situations and circumstances. Sadly, part of us or our lives die. It can be a relationship, a way of life, an ability to do something, the collapse of a business, or the death of a loved one. Even so, in the aftermath, if we are faithful. If we remain open to new life and the struggle to accept it, then a new life does become possible. Yet, what the first disciples discovered in that upper room and what we now discover, is that the pattern of the Cross and Resurrection is not just something we can sometimes see in the general pattern of human life and our own lives. It is that, certainly, but in Jesus Christ we find the one who can make that pattern a physical reality in us and in our lives. New life is not inevitable. As we stand in the ruins of whatever aspect of our lives has disintegrated around us, we need a power and a reality that can lead us from those ruins to the new life that God wants for us. No memory, record of words, or deeds; however great, no simply subjective experience or dream can do this. Only an objective reality the one who is both God and one of us who has actually been

crucified, killed, and who is alive again can truly bring life where only death is all around. As John McLeod Campbell puts it in his famous Easter anthem Love is come again ~

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,

Jesus' touch can call us back to life again.

Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:

Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.



CHRIST CHURCH GEORGETOWN

31st and O Streets, NW
Washington, DC 20007 | 202.333.6677
www.christchurchgeorgetown.org
info@christchurchgeorgetown.org

The Rev. Timothy A. R. Cole, Rector
The Rev. Elizabeth F. Keeler, Asst. to the Rector
The Rev. Elizabeth B. Gardner, Asst. to the Rector
The Rev. Nicholas J. Evancho, Deacon & Seminarian