

## Not a ghost

The Third Sunday of Easter, 18 April 2021

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

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**Bible reading: Luke 24: 36b-48**

*Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover our peace; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

This week's gospel reading is very much an Easter reading. During Easter itself, we tend to just assume some things about the resurrection of Jesus – so on Easter Sunday I was reflecting on Mary, on behalf of us all, addressing the risen Jesus as “teacher, my teacher”; and on Jesus referring to her with the dignity and significance of being a child of God, a sibling of Jesus. Which he means for us too. But we didn't really talk much then about what it meant that Jesus, who had been dead, was appearing to Mary

Today's reading makes us go back and consider a bit more about what this *risen* Jesus is all about. What does it mean when we say that he rose from the dead? How do we understand his resurrection, and what does it mean for us?

So that's where we're going today. It's worth reflecting on. The apostle Paul wrote at some length about who Jesus appeared to after his resurrection as part of making the point that if Jesus has not been raised, our hope is in vain. And indeed, however you think about it, we would not have Christian faith without this part of the story.

Throughout history there have been varying opinions and debates about the exact nature of Jesus' resurrection. That was even happening at the time that the gospels were first written down. Had Jesus really died? Was it just some spiritual form of Jesus that people saw? Were the original disciples all hallucinating, or engaged in mass wishful thinking, or even deception?

These ideas are all addressed by the gospel writers. Here in Luke's account there's a focus on how the disciples were indeed surprised, and even terrified by Jesus' appearance. By the time of this episode, Jesus had already appeared to Peter and a couple of the other disciples – Luke doesn't mention Mary - but clearly there were enough appearances that the disciples were talking about it. In his earlier appearances Jesus was not initially recognised – there's something different about him. But at the same time, in this episode he invites the disciples to examine him and touch him, proving that he is no ghost; and, somewhat amusingly, he eats something to drive that point home. Which, in Luke's gospel, is pretty effective since Jesus was always going from meal to meal in Luke's account. Asking for something to eat would alone have been good proof that this was Jesus!

This is not just a resuscitation of his body: it is something new, but it is linked with his former self, and it is fully embodied, enfleshed. God cares about the physical world. At

Christmas we may wonder at the idea of God taking on human flesh. In the resurrection, Jesus' flesh is made new. The physical world is not *discarded* for the sake of the heavenly realm – which, as a former physicist, I think is best described as being like a further dimension beyond the normal three dimensions we know (plus time). Jesus' body-made-new is fit not just for heaven, but is also fit for this physical world. It's a looking-ahead to the promise of the joining of the realms of earth and heaven, where our bodies, and this world, are not lost but made new.

So there's a physicality in this, even though the early church soon learnt to experience the presence of the risen One by the gifting and impact of the Holy Spirit, to which we return at Pentecost.

As I said, when the disciples first encounter this their first response is to be startled and terrified, which Jesus addresses with a word of peace. As the disciples take it in they experience (as we might expect) a mixture of joy, and wonder, and disbelief. All of which is appropriate and natural. They get – and through them, we get - a glimpse of reality which is bigger than just the three dimensions we know; but which very much impacts this physical world. Because the risen Jesus is not interested in us developing a disembodied spirituality.

In this passage, we see that he does two things. He opens the scriptures to his disciples, drawing out the meanings from throughout the Old Testament, which in so many ways is what our preaching and reflecting in the lead-up to Easter was all about. And from that, he talks about the witness to, and proclamation of, repentance and forgiveness. Those two things are connected because the scriptures are ultimately about the hope and promise of God's healing embrace for the whole world, this physical world.

This is not just about individuals - although it does certainly include a call to each one of us. But the call is to impact the world with repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation, which involves constantly listening and caring in relationships, since at every level of relationships in the world – right up to international relations - there are conflicts and disputes which can only be moved forward through a combination of truth-telling and forgiveness. The sorts of the things we saw modelled in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission; the sorts of things called for in a potential Makaratta Commission in Australia, proposed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Jesus taught that the most important commandments were to love God with heart and soul and strength, and love our neighbour as ourselves. These break down in so many ways, and ultimately Jesus bore the brunt of that – we see the results of that breakdown in his betrayal and sham trial and death. The truth of the world's brokenness is seen on the cross.

But God starts to heal that brokenness. God breaks the cycle with forgiveness and reconciliation, as Jesus meets with his disciples again and offers them peace.

And so the commissioning of his disciples is to bear witness to that grace of God, to bear witness to the healing embrace of the world that is God's plan and desire, to turn to God in

our own lives and share the grace that we know with our neighbours, our community, all God's people. In this, the living Christ is at work through us, to the glory of God.