

4th May 2025 – Third Sunday of Easter: Luke 24:36-49 ‘Jesus appears to the disciples’

Last weekend the world said goodbye to Pope Francis. He was a remarkable man of faith, someone who carried the sort of moral authority and integrity that transcends our usual debates over theology and denominations. Quite rightly, the world paid its respects, and it is important for all of us to pray that the Cardinals make a Spirit-filled, divinely-inspired appointment in a few days’ time.

It is helpful to reflect sometimes that this huge global movement which we now call the Church traces its roots back to one crowded room in Jerusalem, to the wonderful story we read in our passage today. Ten anxious friends are hiding away, now joined by Cleopas and another companion, maybe a few others are in the room as well – perhaps 20 in all. They’ve seen their great hope arrested and executed, but rumours are spreading, now confirmed by Cleopas. What to make of it? Until that point they had no resources, no power, no clarity, no hope. It’s not much to build a global movement on, is it?

But, over the coming years that is exactly what happened. And if we ask the obvious question – how? – then in this passage we see all the clues, right there from the start. These clues are what have come to define the church, its telltale signs if you will – the things which have empowered it over all the centuries, right through to our generation. So, what are these things we share?

First, we share a common hope. And this hope is simply this: Jesus really did rise from the dead. Luke is very careful to record the details which emphasise the truth and reality of this. He makes it clear that the disciples initially thought they were seeing things – but Jesus himself makes it clear that he is very much there as a real, flesh-and-blood person: (v39) ‘Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.’

The first major heresy the church had to deal with was the idea that Jesus didn’t really rise literally – it was a spiritual resurrection: his spirit rose and what the disciples saw was a vision. Luke makes sure to demolish that idea – Jesus even eats. And no spirit can make a piece of fish disappear into a body that isn’t there.

The fact of the resurrection remains the cornerstone of our faith. As St Paul says: Jesus was proved with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead. Elsewhere, he goes on to say: ‘For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive.’ The resurrection is not just proof of who Jesus was, and that everything else he said is true – it’s also the first act of a new humanity. From now on, those who follow Jesus can experience that same resurrection power, the hope of life of eternal. That hope is what energised and inspired those gathered in that upper room, and also the same hope into which Pope Francis was commended last weekend. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Second, we share a common word. Jesus famously opens the disciples’ minds so they could understand the scriptures (v45) – this was Jesus’ second great bible study that day, after his conversation with the two friends on the road to Emmaus.

And the content is similar: demonstrating that there is a divinely-inspired message to take to the whole world, namely that ‘the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and, [that consequently,] repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem’ (v47) – every great movement has to start somewhere and in this case, Jerusalem was the epicentre of these world-changing events.

The point is: wherever the church spreads, there is a consistent message, a common word, what we often call the ‘gospel’, which means good news. The good news is that there is a Saviour, a special divinely anointed rescuer called the Messiah, and this Messiah has died for us, risen from the dead and now offers forgiveness and new life. Wherever we go across the world, any real manifestation of church has this message at its heart.

The cultural clothing might be vastly different: people may meet in the name of Christ in enormous cathedrals and underground cellars, they might stand to sing and sit to pray, or sit to sing and stand to pray, they might have a big worship band or gather in silence, they might separate men and women or adults and children or be all together, they might wear their Sunday best or prison jumpsuits – but the gospel is the same. What we all share is a common word.

Third, we share a common witness. ‘You are witnesses,’ Jesus says to his best friends – and ever since, any follower of Christ carries that same witness. A witness simply shares what they have seen and experienced – and we do, too. We all have a testimony of God’s activity in our lives, and that becomes our common witness. We can all testify to the same Lord who fills our hearts, answers our prayers, and leads us into new life.

When I was 26, I went to Australia, and one Sunday while I was staying with family, I asked them if they could take me to a church. They are not yet believers, so they found their nearest church and drove me up to this tiny building in the middle of the Australian bush. I was 10,000 miles from home, but immediately felt *at home*. The pastor began by getting me to stand up: ‘this is Matt from London, England’, and even though I didn’t know the songs and had never met any of the people, what we gathered round was both the common word and the common witness. What I brought to them was my shared experience of following Jesus on the other side of the world, and what they brought to me was that profound sense that, wherever I am in the world, I am never alone, because the universal body of Christ is there with me: I was at home among fellow believers. We share a common witness.

Finally, we share a common Spirit – and this is the biggest reason of all why this scared group of 10 or 20 was transformed into the global movement we see today. Because this is not just a human thing – this is the work of God. It was God’s idea all along – and having accomplished the resurrection, it was always going to need God’s empowerment. So, Jesus gives them one last instruction: (v49) ‘Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

Anyone who watched Pope Francis’ funeral will have been struck by the clothing. There was a whole range of the most extraordinary garments. The sight of 220 cardinals walking across the Square in those rich red robes – I’m never seen so much cloth in one small area! But, in the end, it’s not the beautiful red or white or purple cloth which energises the Church – the clothing we really need is to be clothed with power from on high. Pope Francis knew that, of course – it’s one reason he largely rejected all the finery and dressed in a simple white cassock most of the time. He knew the clothing that any follower of Christ really needs.

And it’s what we need now – always have, always will. We need the Spirit of Christ. In this Easter season, as we celebrate the resurrection, we also turn our minds to the source of life, and the gift that Jesus promised. We wait excitedly to be clothed with power from on high. As I close, I’ll use a prayer which Pope Francis offered to the Thy Kingdom Come global prayer movement a few years ago, and it’s a fitting way to draw these threads together. Let’s rejoice again today in our shared hope, shared word, shared witness and the Holy Spirit, which is still glorifying Jesus throughout the world.

*Come Holy Spirit - the promise of the Father; the promise of Jesus;
that the Holy Spirit might enlarge and widen our hearts.*

We all have a problem, and that is our hearts tend to shrink, become smaller and closed.

We can’t solve that problem by ourselves. Only the Holy Spirit can solve it. Come Holy Spirit.

And to Jesus, Thy Kingdom Come.

Thy Kingdom Come of the Father that you came to announce.

And to my brothers and sisters... I want to tell you, we walk alongside you in this prayer -

Thy Kingdom Come. Amen.