

It's the evening of the day Jesus rose from the dead, and the disciples are huddling in a locked room, fearful and demoralised. Whatever Mary Magdalene may have told them that morning about her experience of the risen Christ, they hadn't shared her experience. All they knew was that their leader has been killed for blasphemy and sedition, and they had publicly aligned himself with him. The fact that some of them had seen Jesus' body was missing from the tomb didn't help them in the face of their fear that the religious leaders and the temple soldiers might be coming for them too.

Every Sunday in Easter, our first reading is from the book of Acts – the book in the Bible where we see the disciples transformed into apostles and leaders of the brand new Christian Church – publicly teaching, healing, baptising, breaking bread, being imprisoned, being shipwrecked, disagreeing with each other, building rapidly growing communities of faith and worship.

From the locked room to the witnessing Church. From fear and hiding to public preaching, from denial to being dragged in front of the authorities to defend themselves.

Peter, who denies Jesus three times while he waits in the yard of the High Priest, is suddenly accusing whole crowds of people of their part in crucifying Jesus and baptising new believers. The disciples who fell asleep or melted away are being dropped from place to place by the Spirit, evangelising and teaching, and doing all the things that Jesus had done while he was alive. Most of them would go on to die for their faith rather than lie or hide ever again.

What changed?

As Yukiko shared last week from Barbara Brown Taylor – the empty tomb didn't do this for them. It's not the absence of Jesus' body from its resting place that gave courage and inspiration to the disciples and transformed their lives. *It's their experience him as alive and alongside them that did that.*

There were plenty of people who claimed to be, or thought they were, the Messiah, in Jewish history. And there have been plenty of people who've started new social or political or revolutionary movements. We've never heard of most of them – either they died or their momentum fizzled out. The thing that made the difference with Jesus's disciples and the generations who came after them was not that their leader died and then they couldn't find his body.

It's that he *came to them* from beyond the dead, he came *alongside them* to comfort them and he *gave himself* to them, to be *with them forever* – he renewed their hearts and then joined himself to them. And as they would discover and later come more and more to understand, this spiritual union was not just with their friend and Lord, but to the one he called Father, the God and Creator of the Universe – completely unbound by time and space.

The disciples rejoiced when Jesus came into the room where they were hiding in fear. They saw his scars. He spoke peace into their hearts. And he breathed his Spirit on them.

That's what changed them. That's what drove them out from their locked room and into the public square. That's what healed their fearful and grieving hearts and filled them with courage and audacity, to preach a gospel that would likely enrage and appal many of its hearers. That's what enabled them to worship and adore someone who had died the torturous and humiliating death of a slave and name him as God.

And it's the same for every one of us who has received and trusted the message of the gospel ever since. Some people may find it helpful to dwell on 'evidence' for the resurrection, arguments about the empty tomb, the plausibility of this or that part of the historic faith. And the fact that these things happened *in human history* and not in some eternal mythic or legendary sphere is very important to Christianity, for sure. But folded grave clothes are, as Brown Taylor said, a pretty flimsy basis for the extraordinary transformation that took place for Jesus' friends, and they're a pretty flimsy basis for our own faith and the risks we may take in living that out now.

What matters is that, as a community, we welcome the risen Christ into the fearful places in our own hearts and our own experience and receive his peace and his presence. What matters is that we receive His Spirit – in our baptism and in our hearts in prayer, and in his body every time we gather at this table. What matters is that we let the risen One change us, heal our hearts, breathe on us and send us out.

As my friend Alexander Shaia has said, don't look for the evidence of the resurrection at the empty tomb. Look for it in the transforming presence of Christ in communities of faith. But that doesn't mean that a community with the risen Christ indwelling the hearts of its members will be flashy or spectacular or even all that interesting on the world's terms.

The world doesn't know how to value the presence of Christ, because on the world's terms he failed, his mission ended, and he died the death of a slave. But increasingly, the world also doesn't know how to build community beyond family and like-minded friends, how to welcome difference and otherness, how to love strangers, how to be comfortable with silence, how to embrace with unseen, non-physical and mysterious dimensions of reality, how to judge the worth of something that can't be bought or sold. Increasingly the world is losing the grounds for genuine virtue rather than just righteousness along ideological lines, it laughs at holiness, it doesn't know what prayer is, it places self-interest ahead of the common good, and it gives lip-service to the plight of the poor with no concrete action to change the status quo.

So let's not make the mistake of thinking that a community indwelt by the resurrected Christ will be large, or successful, or esteemed or even very respectable. What there will be, is *love, forgiveness, and joy – that flows out and embraces all – regardless of the cost.*

The actual apostle Peter may not have written the letter with his name on it, but it would have emerged from a community formed by his experience and leadership and therefore reflects his teaching. So let's end with these words from the man who denied Jesus, and then hid in a locked room for fear of what might happen next. And let's hear them as being spoken directly to us across the centuries: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.*

Keep silence beginning with this prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you are risen and alive, and you are here with us now.
Awake in us an awareness of your presence, within and among us.
In our silence, tune our hearts to recognise and become aware of you.
Bring us the peace that you gave your first disciples.
Heal our fear and fill us with joy.
Breathe on us and renew the fullness of your Spirit in us.
And send us out, like sparks to set the world on fire.
Amen.