

## Easter Compline Talks 2020

Prof John Morris, Easter Sunday April 11<sup>th</sup>

*Resurrection*; Psalms 31, 134; Chapter 1; Collects 7,2,5

Easter Greetings everyone! Jesus Christ is Risen, He is Risen Indeed! That is how many of us would have been greeting each other this morning had we been able to attend normal church services. On the morning of that first Easter day, it would have been very different. The disciples, who had been so close to Jesus during his ministry, were hidden behind locked doors for fear that they might be the next to suffer a Roman death penalty. The two Marys who had watched the crucifixion with Jesus' mother had come to his tomb expecting to anoint Jesus' dead body with spices, only to find the stone rolled away and no dead body. Instead, the women were confronted first by an angel telling them that Jesus had been raised and then, as they hurried away to pass the angel's message to the disciples, there was the risen Jesus standing in their path and telling them not to be afraid. The gospels differ as to whether the disciples believed the women and whether Peter and another disciple ran to the tomb to check the women's story. What the bible and, indeed history, do concur on is that many people, both at that time and since, have been utterly convinced in the truth of Jesus' resurrection. Indeed, week by week in our creed, we state our belief both that Jesus rose from the dead and in "the resurrection of the body". It is that second phrase that I want to discuss tonight.

What do we understand by the phrase and how can we link that understanding with Jesus' resurrection and appearances to his disciples in the period between Easter and the ascension? As most, but perhaps not all of you may know, I've taught human anatomy to medical students for all my professional life. I've done surgery on the living and dissected the dead and can reasonably claim to know "the body" intimately, in health and disease, in life and death. You might therefore think I'd be the last person to believe in "the resurrection of the body", but I'd like to share with you how I came to that belief.

The concept of the resurrection of a "body" goes back a long way - you only have to look at burial customs such as those in ancient Egypt otherwise why they put food and drink in the tomb and, if you were well off, have servants entombed with you? In the OT, in words well known from Handel's Messiah, Job says "I know that my redeemer liveth .. and though worms destroy *this body*, yet in *my flesh* shall I see God. It's interesting to note the distinction between "this body" and "my flesh" or "substance", but it gets us no closer to understanding what a post-resurrection body would be like.

I'll come clean at the start; what I don't believe in is some sort of parallel existence, roughly the same as this, but called heaven because all the nasty bits have been taken out; my body as it was at the moment of death, but transformed by some sort of Star Trek "beam me up Scotty", eternally (and that's a long time) casting a crown onto a sea of crystal. There's a problem both with that sort of body, and with time, and the two I think are interlinked.

Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances are fairly consistent. They make it clear that the 'body' of the resurrected Jesus was not immediately recognisable and could do things that no human body can. Mary, who knew Jesus so well, mistook the person who appeared to her by the tomb as the gardener until she heard Jesus say her name; the disciples walking to Emmaus didn't recognise Jesus till he broke bread, whereupon he vanished; and Jesus could appear to the disciples even though they were meeting in a locked room. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Corinthians. To those who question what sort of body we will have after resurrection he says bluntly "You fool" then makes the comparison between a wheat seed and the plant it becomes, and concludes that we are "sown as a natural body, raised as a spiritual body; flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." then follows that wonderful phrase "We shall all be changed in the

twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet” glorious imagery, wonderfully set to music in Handel’s ‘Messiah’.

In one of the resurrection appearances, when the disciples think he is a spirit, Jesus contradicts them saying “for a spirit has not flesh and bones *as you see* I have”. At first sight that seems to contradict what I have been saying earlier, but we must remember that our human eyes give us only a very partial view of the reality around us. Unlike insects we can’t detect ultraviolet – our eyes have evolved to suit our ecological niche; and unlike bats, we can’t hear ultrasound. What any animal ‘sees’ is its brain’s best working model of what is going on around it. You may know that I am red-green colour-blind, but I ‘see’ a person’s lips as red even if they use green lip-gloss! Given the limits of our senses, I conclude that the resurrected Jesus showed himself to the disciples in a bodily form because that was the only way in which they would recognise him as their resurrected friend and Lord, living on beyond his death on the cross. Christ’s *essential message* in those appearances was to convince the disciples, and us, that there is a life that transcends the death of the physical body; it was *not* to show that life beyond death continues in an identical bodily form. Physicists tell us that our solid-appearing bodies are made of atoms that are largely empty space; a set of energies held together by subatomic forces. Furthermore, those atoms that temporarily make up ‘my’ body have been part of other humans, animals, plants and stars over the millennia. None are just ‘mine’! Our ‘body’, particularly our bones, may appear relatively unchanging, but all the molecules of which it is composed change quite rapidly. Mountains appear even more unchanging, but we now know that their current appearance is just a geological snapshot of continually changing tectonic plates.

So, what is the ‘body’ that I can think of as being resurrected? It cannot be the molecules themselves, which will be the same the moment before death and the moment after. I’m sure none of us would want that dying organism to continue. Rather, ‘my body’ is the way in which molecules are transiently *organised* to make my functioning, living self. It’s a bit like the difference between the brain and the ‘mind’ or, for that matter, the ‘soul’. We cannot really use the same language concepts for the body and the person, for brain and the mind, but that is the only language that we have, and hence the confusion. Limitations of our vision and appreciation of time encourage us to think rather simply about our bodies. Modern physics teaches us that matter, time and space are all interwoven parts of one continuum; that each is in some way a function of the other in God’s creation. You’ll remember Jesus’ phrase when questioned “before Abraham was, I am”; time in God’s eternity cannot be the same linear time that we experience in our earthly lives.

I cannot picture what my ‘resurrection body’ or ‘everlasting life’ will be like because I am presently confined in this molecular world, but I do believe that, at death, I shall pass beyond that confinement to an existence with God where time, space and matter as we currently know them are irrelevant. Love is none the less real because it has no molecular structure, and “God is love”. I’ll end with Paul’s words which are particularly appropriate for someone like me who has spent many thousands of hours peering down an electron microscope. He wrote “Now I see through a glass, darkly, then I shall see face to face”. (note again that Paul has to fall back on a bodily image). The important thing for us, here and now, is not how we visualise or understand either our resurrection body or the afterlife, but whether our beliefs in Christ’s promises strengthen us for the task he has given us of loving and caring for our neighbours during the time we inhabit our molecular bodies during our earthly lives, and before we are reclothed in new spiritual bodies and come ‘face to face’ with our God.

## Easter Compline Talks 2020

Prof John Morris, Easter 2 April 19<sup>th</sup>

2: Road to Emmaus – from despair to joy; Psalms 4, 31; Chapter 2; Collects 1,3,4,6

This evening I'd like to consider the familiar gospel story of the encounter of two disciples with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus and at the meal to which they invited someone they thought was a stranger. Emmaus is a common place name in the region (it means 'warm springs') and there are two contenders for the biblical Emmaus, both about 7 miles from Jerusalem: there's Emmaus Nicopolis in the valley of Ayyalon and also what is now the town of Motza but called Emeaus by the contemporary writer Josephus. The identity of the two disciples walking to Emmaus is also unclear. Luke calls one "Cleopas". There is a "Clopas in John 19 "Mary wife of Clopas who stood with Mary the mother of Jesus (those two Mary's were apparently sisters), and Mary of Magdala at the foot of the cross. The name may be a shortened form of Cleopatros (the glory of the father). There has been a lot of speculation as to who the other might have been – according to an Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John it was Nicodemus; another suggestion is that it was Clopas's wife Mary - there is no evidence one way or another. John Gilman suggests that Luke may have purposely failed to give the second person either a name or a gender as a strategy to invite his reader to imagine themselves as the unnamed disciple, and thus make the same journey of enlightenment.

The meeting of the two disciples with the risen Jesus is only given in any detail in Luke (24), a passage described by one bible scholar as "one of Luke's most exquisite literary achievements". There is a much shorter passage in Mark (16) which has some similarities, but which doesn't name either the disciples or destination, but says simply "Afterward, Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country; the two returned and reported it to the rest, but they were not believed." You'll remember that Mark also says that, when Mary of Magdala brought the news that she had seen Jesus and he was alive to 'his mourning and sorrowful followers', she also was not believed.

The broad story is well known, so I won't just go through it, but try to suggest what are the key things in the passage that have an important message for us, today. Two of Jesus' followers were walking along the road apparently on the evening of the day that the Marys had discovered the empty tomb. They were deep in solemn and serious discussion when another person who they did not recognise joined them. (We noted last week that Mary also didn't immediately recognise the risen Jesus in the garden). Gregory the Great suggests that, although the disciples loved Jesus, it was their doubts and sorrow that prevented them recognising him. When the stranger asked what they were talking about they said in amazement "Are you the only person living in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's been happening?"; then, having said they were talking about Jesus of Nazareth "a prophet powerful in speech and action", they continue "but we had been hoping that he was the man to liberate Israel." There are three things to note here: first, that they thought of Jesus as "a prophet", not as the messiah or son of God; second, they said "we *had been* hoping" so at that point they had lost all hope and were utterly dejected; and third, what had they been hoping for? Like all disciples at the time it was 'the liberation of Israel' in other words, getting rid of the Romans and allowing the Jews to worship as they had always done. At that point it seems that there was no thought or hope of a complete transformation of their understanding and worship. If we try to put ourselves in their shoes, I guess we'd have been just the same. We hope only for what we can visualise – even if as Paul puts it "through a glass darkly". The disciples clearly knew about the empty tomb because they said "this is the third day after the crucifixion, and now some women of our group have astounded us; they went early to the tomb, found no body and came back with a story about angels saying that Jesus was alive. Some of our friends also went to the tomb and found it empty, but didn't see him". You can just about hear the resignation in those words: the women were

overwrought; the tomb had been ransacked; it was the end of what could have been a wonderful story.

But then the stranger starts talking to them. He doesn't just say "Don't be stupid, look, it's me, Jesus". No! He does say "How dull you are" (a criticism that we, too, must accept) but he then goes on, beginning with Moses and the prophets' to explain all that the scriptures teach about what had gone before and foreshadowed his earthly ministry. We too, need regular educating in the entire background to our faith, and we must thank God that we can get this through regular church attendance and bible reading.

When the three walkers reached Emmaus, the person the disciples took to be a stranger apparently indicated that he would continue with his journey – no particular surprise there. However, the two disciples invited the stranger to stay and to eat with them, and it was only during the meal, when Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, and offered it to them that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." Two points to note here: how often do we fail to recognize some aspect of Jesus in a stranger, and invite him into our lives. We give thanks that, each week, at Communion, we have the chance to recognise Christ anew as the bread is blessed and broken. We can only pray that our eyes are open and our minds receptive.

The story doesn't end there; having recognised their risen Lord, and despite the fact that the day was nearly over when they started their meal "Without a moment's delay they set out and returned to Jerusalem" to tell the disciples and assembled company the story of their day and learned that the risen Jesus had also appeared to Simon Peter. Our message here is that, having recognised the reality of the resurrection, they didn't say to themselves "Fantastic, Jesus is alive again, now let's turn in for the night and think about what to do tomorrow"! No, that opening of their eyes to a deeper reality made them really urgent to pass on the good news to their friends. At the end of our Eucharist, having thanked God for feeding us, we pray "Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory" and our dismissal ends by urging us "to love and serve the Lord". We, too, should be urgent in that task and ask God to guide us in what he would have us do.

In conclusion, this is not just a lovely story of how two people, 2000 years ago, walked to Emmaus and discovered for themselves the risen Jesus in an apparent stranger. Jesus offers himself as our companion on our own journeys from Jerusalem to Emmaus, teaching us by his life and death. The disciples' journey from despair over Christ's crucifixion to faith in his resurrection can be a model of our own journey to a deeper faith. What are the impediments to our own spiritual growth? For the two disciples, it was their terrible disappointment and sorrow that were all dispelled when their eyes were opened to all the workings of God in the world. We will have times of sorrow and doubt and despair, but we, too, have the opportunity to sense Jesus' presence with us in the breaking of the bread. The disciples' walk to Emmaus started out in sadness and disappointment, but ended in joy, excitement and faith. The same can happen to each one of us. The passage asks each of us the question "How do I recognise the risen Christ" and, having recognized him, what does that mean for the rest of my life? The two disciples showed their openness and caring for someone they took to be a stranger by inviting him to stay and eat with them. We, too, have to invite Jesus into our lives; he will never force his way in. The passage perhaps has a particular message for this health pandemic; we need to go beyond our own self-concern and sadness. If we can, by our actions, effectively invite a stranger to share whatever we have, we have Jesus' assurance who, when asked "Lord when did we see you sick or hungry", answered "in as much as you did it for these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me". This tells me that Jesus often appears to us in the guise of a stranger in need – and makes me pause and think how often I turn away rather than offering help.

In a very real sense, then, the road to Emmaus is a road that must be walked by any and everyone who answers the call to “love and serve the Lord”.

## Easter Compline Talks 2020

Prof John Morris, Easter 3 April 26<sup>th</sup>

3. *Appearance to the eleven at table*; Psalms 91, 134; Chapter 3; Collects 2,5,7

Last Sunday we looked at account in Luke's gospel of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the two people walking to Emmaus, apparently on the afternoon of that first Easter day, and then 'with haste' going back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven 'as they sat at table'. What I'd like us to think about tonight is what happened next. Mark, Luke and John all give accounts of the appearance of Jesus to the eleven in the upper room on the evening of that first Easter Sunday.

Mark, in a final passage which some think is a later addition, is as usual, brief. "He appeared to the eleven as they sat at table; and reproached them for their incredulity and dullness, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he was raised from the dead", then follows Jesus' instruction to the disciples to go and proclaim the gospel to the world. The equivalent passage in Luke says 'Now as they (the disciples) said these things, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them and said 'Peace be with you'. But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. But he said 'why are you so perturbed .. ..Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself.' John's gospel (20:19-23) says "Late that Sunday evening, when the disciples were together behind locked doors, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them. 'Peace be with you!' he said, and showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus repeated 'Peace be with you!' and said 'As the Father sent me, so I send you.' Then he breathed on them, saying 'Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive any man's sins, they stand forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.'" There is a great deal to think about in these short accounts, which in many respects are very similar, but with one really major difference.

In passing, that last phrase in John about Jesus giving the disciples power to forgive or retain sins worried me because only God can forgive sins. I was therefore pleased to read that, if you understand the Greek text, which I don't, what this means is that the disciples were given authority to tell believers that God had forgiven their sin, the actual result depending on whether their hearers accept or reject Jesus as the bearer of the sins of the world.

We've already noted that the disciples were meeting in a locked room because of their fear. They had every reason to be fearful. Put yourself in their position. They had either witnessed or heard eye witness accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and death on the cross; and they'd probably seen other people dying in agony when crucified – it was not a particularly uncommon punishment – indeed, there was a site allocated for it outside the city walls – Golgotha – literally 'skull hill' (the medical term for part of the skull is the 'calvarium', from where we get the term 'calvary'. What was more, someone had removed Jesus's body. The disciples were known as Jesus' close associates – were they to be next? Small wonder then that Mary was not believed when she told them that she had encountered the risen Jesus; fear and grief does interesting things to perception.

Jesus' greeting "Peace be with you" (Hebrew *shalom alakem*) was a common enough Jewish greeting, but a particularly appropriate one because the disciples would have been feeling anything but peaceful. Jesus then went on to reproach (or 'rebuke') the disciples for not believing what Mary had said. It's hardly surprising that the disciples didn't believe Mary and, to that extent, the risen Jesus' reproach or rebuke seems rather harsh. You'll remember that he also reproached the two walkers on the Emmaus road "How dull you are".

What was the disciples' response to Jesus' greeting? Mark doesn't tell us, Luke says they were terrified, but John says they were 'filled with joy'. However, a closer look resolves this apparent discrepancy. The disciples' initial terror was perfectly natural – again, try to imagine yourself in their

place - but note that this was before Jesus showed them his hands and feet. John says they were "filled with joy" but only *after* Jesus showed them his hands and side. I suggest that the risen Jesus showed them his wounds because humans understand our world primarily from the evidence of our eyes. So the disciples "rejoiced" (apparently the greek word *idontes* means perceived, understood intelligently). Showing them his wounds forced the disciples to grasp what became the central confession of the church, that the risen Christ is none other than the crucified Jesus.

Next, Jesus said 'As the Father sent me, so I send you'. First, note the "sent". During his earthly ministry Jesus spoke for his father in heaven. We can't see God the father, but we can know Jesus - the representation (not representative) of God the Father, sent to us in the only way that we can understand. Then, 'So I send you'. Jesus was sending his disciples (and us if we claim to be disciples) on a mission just as his Father had sent him. The emphasis here is on the authority of the person doing the sending. Jesus' disciples became apostles (literally the sent ones).

The gospels and Acts give somewhat different versions of what has become known as The Great Commission. Although Paul's epistles don't refer explicitly to Jesus giving the commission, they clearly emphasize its validity for the whole church (though some in the early church thought that the message was only for the Jews). The importance for us is that it expresses God's will for every believer, in every age. And what is that mission? "as the Father sent me, so I send you". What characterised Jesus' ministry during his earthly life should also characterise the church's ministry, *our* ministry. It's not just preaching the gospel, baptising, teaching, forming churches - it should involve tending/healing the sick, helping those who are mentally disturbed (casting out demons was the contemporary phrase) and 'feeding the hungry' - absolutely no doubt about the implications there. We have literally been given the task of carrying on Jesus' work in the world. Interestingly that passage (John 15) ends 'But when your Advocate has come, whom I will send you from the Father - the spirit of truth that issues from the Father - he will witness to me. And you are also my witnesses' - and he continues 'The spirit of Truth will guide you into all truth'

This brings me to the one big difference between the various accounts. It is where John's gospel says 'Then Jesus breathed on them saying "Receive the Holy Spirit"' (the word 'breathed' recalls God breathing life into Adam). Some suggest this is John's account of Pentecost; others that Jesus gave the disciples a 'temporary infusion' of His Spirit, to 'tide them over' until Pentecost. Acts clearly places the sending of the holy spirit at Pentecost, and there are many problems with the 'temporary infusion' idea. John himself (ch 14,15) records Jesus promising that the father would send the holy spirit after he was no longer with them and there is no evidence the disciples were empowered at this point. That came later at Pentecost when they were empowered to start their apostolic mission.

Pentecost is the Greek name for what the Jews called 'The feast of harvest' or 'feast of weeks' which celebrated the early wheat harvest in May or June, 50 days after Easter. This was the Jewish feast that the disciples were celebrating when they received the holy spirit as 'tongues of flame'. The important point for us is not when or how the disciples received the holy spirit to give them power to continue Christ's work, but that there is compelling evidence that, whenever it happened, it made 'new men' of the apostles who went from being up-country provincial and mostly poorly educated followers of an itinerant charismatic Jewish preacher into a band of people who would change the views and beliefs of huge numbers of people around the Mediterranean, argue convincingly with the highest and mightiest in the lands, and preach a gospel which continues to have enormous power world-wide.

And so, if we are to call ourselves disciples of our Lord the commission given to the disciples is also our commission from our Lord.

## Easter Compline Talks 2020

Prof John Morris, Easter 4, May 3<sup>rd</sup>

4: Appearance to 'doubting Thomas'; Psalms 4, 91; Chapter 1; Collects 1,3,4,6

This Sunday I'd like us to consider the story of the disciple known as 'doubting Thomas' and to discuss the whole question of the role of uncertainty and doubt in faith. I apologise if, like Joyce, you thought I was going to consider Thomas last week because, as she pointed out to me, I entitled that talk "Appearance to the eleven at table" which implied that, because Judas couldn't have been there, Thomas must have been in the group! Not only did my arithmetic let me down but also I hadn't thought ahead sufficiently, because I knew I wanted to devote a whole talk to Thomas.

Let's look first at the Gospel story, which appears only in John 20. "But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus (i.e. The Twin) was not with the rest when Jesus came. The other disciples told him 'We have seen the Lord' but Thomas said 'Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, and unless I put my fingers into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe it.' A week later his disciples were again in the room and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them, saying 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand and put it into my side. Be unbelieving no longer, but believe'. Thomas said 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said 'Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith'". On the basis of this passage Thomas has earned the nickname 'Doubting Thomas', but I'll try to convince you, both that this is an unfair judgement, and also that, although doubt and faith may seem incompatible, they are essential bed-fellows in our life journey.

What do we know about Thomas? Only a little, but more than about many of the other disciples. Born in Galilee, he was probably a fisherman (we shall find him fishing with Peter and the others in next week's talk). He was a man of great courage and loyalty: when the other disciples tried to restrain Jesus from going to Bethany to raise Lazarus because people of that region had previously tried to stone Jesus (John 11.16) it was Thomas who said 'Let us also go with him that we may die with him'. Also, when Jesus said, during the Last Supper, that he was 'going to prepare a place for them' (John 14.6), Thomas was the only one brave enough to say 'Lord we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Maybe Thomas thought that Jesus was talking about a physical place, but his question provoked that wonderful statement from Jesus "I am the way, the truth and the life". Thomas was also honest; he wouldn't just sit and nod agreement, but would ask the questions that were in all the disciples' minds. To me, Thomas seems more a 'sceptic' or 'independent thinker' than a 'doubter'. Many of us, at some point in our lives and for some reason, will have missed out on an extraordinary event, only to be told by friends "You really should have been there!" Thomas was the one who missed out on that first resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples. We don't know why he wasn't with the others; maybe it was fear, maybe he wanted to be alone to grieve; maybe he felt he had wrongly pinned all his hopes on Jesus; maybe he felt he had let Jesus down by running away with the others when Jesus was arrested. For whatever reason, he wasn't there, so it is hardly surprising that he simply (if dramatically) asked for the same proof of the resurrected Jesus that the others had seen. Thomas wanted to know for himself; he wouldn't let others do his thinking for him. Later in his life it is said that Thomas was the apostle who took the message of the gospel to India. He died (reputedly having been killed by Hindu priests of the goddess Kali) in Kerala, India in a place now called St Thomas' mount.

Before we get to Thomas's 'doubts' we should note that, after Jesus had appeared to the other disciples they, like Mary to whom Jesus appeared in the garden, went and found Thomas to tell him the good news of the resurrection. The message for us in this is quite clear; we too must be urgent to tell others that good news. Next, we should note that, despite his doubts, Thomas was with the



other disciples a week later. That must have taken some courage; but he did want to know the truth. It's only right that our minds want evidence to help us discern the truth, rather than believing what others tell us (just think about fake news!). Graham Ward (Regius Prof Divinity at Oxford), who has grappled with the question 'what makes faith believable', points out that belief is not only about reasoning and knowledge; belief is also shaped by the way we perceive things, according to our hopes, culture, and (as with Thomas) our doubts. Faith is of course an essential ingredient for Christians, but that doesn't mean that we cannot think deeply and have times of doubt. We are all Thomases in that sense! It is good for us to be curious and to want to know the truth about our faith, to read, listen, think about it. All my training in medical science tells me to ask questions, to ask for evidence, to ask if there isn't another explanation for some observation, to ask 'if what you say is correct, what is a prediction that could or could not be tested?'. For me, questioning is a way to a deeper faith, and certainly preferable to what is often called 'blind faith'. Belief is not a conclusion of our logical minds, it is more a constant thinking, questioning, and trusting way of living. Our brains are one of the greatest gifts God has given us, because they can help us to know him better. We mustn't leave our brains outside the church door. Therefore, I suggest that doubt is an essential ingredient of faith, as is hard-boiled realism. We must keep on asking the big questions, because they challenge us to deepen our faith.

There can be very few of us who have never had doubts about various elements of the biblical basis of the Christian faith. Although Thomas expressed his doubts to the other disciples, it is striking that, although Jesus said 'happy are those who have faith without physical evidence', nevertheless he did reappear to Thomas, to show him evidence. Thomas was probably quaking in his boots, expecting a rebuke, but Jesus didn't rebuke him – he came to where Thomas was and overcame his fear and doubt with grace and compassion. It's my belief that Christ will come to reassure each one of us who struggle with faith today, though not in as immediate and graphic a way as he did for Thomas. At the end of the gospel passage Jesus says 'You have found faith because you have seen me. Happy (i.e. blessed) are those who never saw me and yet have *found* faith". Note the emphasis on the 'found'. Jesus wasn't putting down Thomas, he was blessing him and us.

We all wrestle with the big questions of life and it seems unlikely that the more faith we have, the fewer questions we will ask. The bible offers us a picture of faith in which certainty and doubt are interwoven very closely. Faith is not certainty, but 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. We want to believe, so it seems to me that, if we openly discuss our faith and our uncertainties, this can give Jesus the opportunity to come to us, in whatever way will help us understand, to know him better, and to grow our faith. We are not told whether Thomas took the opportunity to feel the wounds as Jesus offered. Just seeing Jesus and the wounds was for Thomas sufficient evidence of the resurrection and sufficient to spur him to a life of action spreading the gospel.

This challenges us in our own witnessing to the resurrection. Has our believing transformed us? How are we living signs of the resurrection? Do others see in us something worth believing in? I'm sure that we have all been helped by seeing the love and light shining in the lives of other Christians. We can only pray that the Holy Spirit will give power to our weaknesses. Jesus doesn't need to appear to us with his wounds, he shows himself to us in so many other ways in our everyday life, and through prayer. Thomas was loyal, brave, honest to the point of bluntness, an independent thinker, and a realist sceptical of the judgements of others. He is also the model of a faithful disciple. We should take our questions, our doubts to Jesus in prayer, and wait patiently for his response so that, like Thomas we too can exclaim "My Lord and my God".

## Easter Compline Talks 2020

Prof John Morris, Easter 5, May 10<sup>th</sup>

5: Resurrection appearance on lake shore; Psalms 31, 134; Chapter 2; Collects 2,5,7

This Sunday I'd like us to consider John's account of Jesus' appearance to certain disciples after they had been fishing on what John calls 'The Sea of Tiberias' – that is, Lake Galilee. There is so much in this passage, and because it has two rather different parts, I will devote two Compline talks to it.

The story in John 21 is familiar. "Some time later, Jesus showed himself to his disciples once again, by the Sea of Tiberias. Simon Peter and Thomas 'the Twin' were together with Nathanael and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Simon Peter said, 'I am going fishing'; 'We will go with you' said the others. However, that night, they caught nothing. Morning came, and Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples did not know it was Jesus. He called out to them 'Friends, have you caught anything?' They answered 'No.' He said 'Shoot the net to starboard and you will make a catch.' They did so and found they could not haul the net aboard, there were so many fish in it. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter 'It is the Lord.' When Simon Peter heard that, he wrapped his coat about him (for he had stripped) and plunged into the sea. The rest of them came on in the boat, towing the net full of fish; for they were not far from land. When they came ashore they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish laid on it, and some bread. Jesus said 'Bring some of your catch.' Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to land, full of big fish; and yet the net was not torn. Jesus said 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples dared ask 'Who are you?'; they knew it was the Lord. Jesus now took the bread and fish and gave it to them."

I'm going to stop there and leave for our next Compline the continuation of the story when Peter is told three times "Feed my sheep." I must confess that, before preparing this talk, I'd forgotten the similar fishing miracle in Luke 5 when, very early in his Galilee ministry, Jesus was teaching by the lake and people were crowding around him, so he got into a boat belonging to Simon Peter and taught the crowds from there. When he had finished, he told Simon to move the boat into deep water and let down the nets. On this occasion, Peter argued, saying that they had been fishing all night and caught nothing, but added 'if you say so, I will let down the nets' and they made a very large catch. Seeing this Simon said 'Lord, leave me, sinner that I am' only to be told 'Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men'. Note the similarity of the last phrase with 'Feed my sheep'. In Luke, this was when the fishermen left their fishing boats and became disciples. Whether or not these two traditions have become entangled is interesting but irrelevant. We should, however, note that, on both occasions, it led to disciples following Jesus more closely and being empowered.

Let's start at the beginning of the post-resurrection appearance by the lake. Why were those disciples in Galilee? They had already seen the resurrected Jesus on a number of occasions, but each time it had been very temporary – Jesus had simply disappeared. Or perhaps it would be better to say that 'the disciples lost sight of him'. So often it is the limitation of *our* vision, rather than anything that Jesus does, that means we cannot perceive his presence with us. By going to Galilee, the disciples were doing as Jesus had instructed. At the end of their last supper together, Jesus said "After I am risen again I will go before you into Galilee." Also, after the resurrection, he told the two Marys as they fled from the empty tomb "Tell my brothers that they are to leave for Galilee; they will see me there." But also, what else were the disciples to do? They did what any worker might do in that situation – they went back to their old job. Most of the inner group of disciples were fishermen; that was the only job they knew. They needed both the money and the food! The important message for us, it seems to me, is that Jesus can appear to us just as easily when we are engaged in our daily work, as he can during a religious service. And we shall see him in our work, if only we keep our eyes and our minds open to him.

At this point, and despite having known Jesus and having previously been sent out by him on local preaching missions, without Jesus's material presence the disciples clearly did not feel able to continue their 'fishers of men' role. Jesus had promised that they would be empowered by the holy spirit, but the disciples had not yet experienced Pentecost. They were in a sort of limbo. We, too, when we have many other concerns, can lose sight of the mission that Jesus has given us. If we lose sight of Jesus, we too risk going back to our 'old life', working hard, but to very little effect.

So, the seven Galileans returned to their homes. Peter, and his fishing partners James and John, Thomas ('doubting Thomas'), Nathanael, and two others went fishing. Night was the traditional time for fishing in lake Galilee, because at night the fish could not see the trammel nets. They had fished all night, but caught nothing. As dawn came and the light improved, they saw a man standing on the beach. They would not have been surprised when he yelled "Friends, have you caught anything?"; traders would be around to buy the catch. When they admitted they had caught nothing, they probably were surprised and perhaps even offended, when this apparent stranger told them to shoot out the net on the other side of the boat. We often see it as a sign of weakness to admit to failures in our efforts, but here the message for us is to listen to our Lord and change our unproductive actions, so that, like the disciples who found their net so full that they could not even haul it aboard, we may be surprised at the results if we put our whole trust in Jesus.

We might note here briefly that, in appearing on the lake shore, the risen Jesus clearly knew where the disciples were. So, although Jesus may sometimes seem 'hidden' from our eyes, we are never hidden from him. That should be a source both of great comfort (Jesus watching over us) but also of considerable challenge because, whatever we do – good or ill, our Lord is aware.

In the boat, it was John, the 'disciple who Jesus loved', who suddenly recognised the man on the shore and said to Peter "It is the Lord" with the result that the ever-impetuous Peter put on some clothes and plunged into the lake to swim the 100 yards to the shore, despite the fact that he was the owner of the boat and the best to control it. We, too, need to be very active in our efforts to see our Lord and be close to him.

When they arrived on shore, Jesus already had a fire going, some fish cooking, and some bread. Having reaped the rewards of obedience to Jesus command in their fishing, the disciples were immediately invited into a closer fellowship with Jesus "Come and have breakfast". Interestingly, having been invited to breakfast John says that none of the disciples dared ask Jesus "Who are you?" although they knew. This reminds me that there are times when we have been confronted by Jesus in such a way that we, too, have scarcely dared to say "Who are you" because, for whatever reason, our faith has been too weak. But, despite not daring to ask, the disciples *did* join in the meal Christ offered them on the lake shore and, in so doing, they were strengthened for their mission ahead.

Jesus not only said "Come and have breakfast" but also "Bring some of your catch". Jesus invites us all to dine with him, both here – in communion – and in heaven; and he also asks us to 'bring some of our catch'. And that begs the question - have we helped someone to know Christ better? On the shore of Lake Galilee, Jesus offered the hungry fishermen a breakfast of fish and bread – physical sustenance for life here on earth. Just as the disciples needed energy for their apostolic mission ahead, so too our weekly communion should give us strength for whatever mission Jesus has given and entrusted to us. And how can we understand what that mission is? I'll try to explore that next Sunday when we consider the second part of this story when Simon Peter was told "feed my sheep."

## Easter Compline Talks 2020

Prof John Morris, Easter 6, May 17th

6: Appearance on lake shore 2; Psalms 4, 91; Chapter 3; Collects 1,3,4,6

This evening we continue with Christ's appearance on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Having returned to Galilee, a number of the disciples, including Peter and John, had gone night-time fishing, but caught nothing. As dawn broke a man on the shore hailed them, they confessed that they'd had no luck and were told to fish on the other side, whereupon they caught almost more fish than they could manage. John recognised the man on the shore as Jesus, Peter swam to shore, and they were all invited to breakfast and to bring some of their catch with them. The gospel contains no record of anything said at breakfast; we are told only that the disciples did not dare ask Jesus who he was.

Today we look at what happened after the breakfast. It seems that Jesus and Peter had walked away from the others whereupon Jesus asked Peter 'Do you love me more than all else?' to which Peter replied 'Yes, Lord, you now that I love you' and was told 'Then feed my lambs'. A second time Jesus asked 'Do you love me?' and, on receiving the same answer, told Peter 'Feed my sheep'. When Jesus asked the question yet again this really hurt Peter who said 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you' only to be told yet again 'Feed my sheep'. After this exchange, Jesus then went on to tell Peter that, although when he was young he could do what he liked, when he became old strangers would bind him, foretelling 'the manner of death by which Peter was to glorify God'; then Jesus added simply 'Follow me'. After the threefold question and answer and that final command 'follow me', Peter apparently looked round and saw John following them. John was the 'beloved disciple' who at the last supper asked Jesus which of them would betray him. Seeing John, Peter asked Jesus 'Lord what will happen to him?' and was given the enigmatic answer 'If it should be my will that he wait until I come, what is that to you? Follow me.'

The three-fold question and answer is a reflection of the questioning and three-fold denial of Peter as he sat warming himself while Jesus was being interrogated by Caiaphas before the crucifixion. Now Peter is being questioned again, but this time by Jesus himself. It is interesting that that Jesus didn't say something like 'will you be one of my first missionaries and be prepared to lay down your life?' That first question, 'do you love me above all else' is not only a question to Peter but a question to each one of us and it is a question that not only Peter, but each one of us has to answer in our own way. It seems to me that there are two key things to look at here: the word 'love' and the phrase 'all else'. Like Peter, it is rather easy for us here in Kidlington to answer 'Lord you know that I love you' without thinking really carefully about what that means. The word 'love' is used in so many ways. But here we are not talking about superficial attraction, we are talking about love that - if it comes to the crunch - puts the other person first, even at deadly risk to oneself; that is the sort of 'love' that Peter was being asked about and which he would ultimately demonstrate. All of us would say that we love our partners and our children and we accept that, ultimately, it could mean sacrificing ourselves for them. But are we prepared to lay down our life for our Lord? And then, what about the 'above all else' - that is an enormous challenge. The three-fold question suggests that true faith has to stem from a love of Christ. As with human love, we can *only* really love someone if we know them really well - so being a disciple is literally a continual quest to know Jesus better so that we can know him well enough to love him. CH Spurgeon put it this way: We must learn the art of "loving people to Christ". Jesus didn't really need to ask the question of Peter, but he did want Peter to confront the question face on, perhaps to help Peter feel more confident in his faith for the task that lay ahead of him. Peter was naturally upset when Jesus asked the third time, but sometimes our feelings (which are really self-protection) have to be hurt if we are to understand the reality about ourselves and our motivations. In the garden of Caiaphas' palace, Peter had shown himself to be more concerned about his own safety, than declaring that he was a follower of Jesus. We must ask ourselves how many times have we, either consciously or unconsciously, not spoken up

about our Christian faith in the company of others even though the worst it might mean would be ridicule?

So, the question was asked three times but the follow on, although superficially the same on each occasion, was subtly different. I have learned that, if you understand new testament Greek, the first time, 'pasture (feed) my lambs' is in the present tense – in other words, keep on tending, feeding, caring, particularly for the youngest. This asks us what we have done to encourage faith in the young people with whom we come into contact, so that they can come to know more about Jesus and his message. The second time the word 'feed' has a more supervisory quality – not only feeding but also governing. Interestingly, I discover that Peter used the same Greek word for 'tend' in his first letter to the elders of the churches of Asia Minor 'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care'. And the third time a different Greek word is again used for 'tend' – here it implies providing wide-ranging care and spiritual food for from the youngest to the oldest. This, then, is a life-long task of continual action to nourish and to care. The analogy of God's people with 'sheep' is, of course, very familiar from its OT roots. Ps 95 'For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his fold.' And, in the gospels, and that of John in particular, Jesus is the 'Good Shepherd' and 'Door of the sheepfold'. All this reminds us of our own spiritual immaturity and vulnerability.

The word 'feed' can mean many things. For a start, Jesus' command challenges us in times of famine around the world to use some of the resources with which we have been so blessed to feed others. It is good that organisations like Christian Aid are in the forefront of that work. We all need food for our bodies, but they are only a temporary home for our eternal souls, and feeding others with a knowledge of Christ's love is more difficult. We shall undoubtedly come across people who may in every other way may be good, very close friends, but who 'don't wish to know' about the gospel. I believe that we should have confidence that, even for those who apparently 'don't wish to know', speaking to them about God's love in a crisis may be just the moment when they will be receptive to Jesus' message. Furthermore, just as at times it may be better to give food aid by donating seed, tractors or whatever, so too we can also proclaim the gospel by the way in which we live our lives, provided we are also clear about our Christ-centred reasons. In a real sense the 'food' that we can offer is none other than the word of God lived out in the lives of believers. We have all been given various and different talents. For some it is talking about their faith; for others it is simply acting out their faith often in a self-sacrificing way. Marvin Ashton puts it this way: 'The best indicator that we are growing spiritually is the way we treat other people'. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about people, not about programs, not about churches. Sometimes we can get so tied up in programs that we lose perspective. I suggest this is potentially a problem for us as we have to spend a lot of time thinking about the plans for the interior, a refectory and the roof at big St Mary's, the kitchen for Hampton Poyle etc. We do need to preserve the heritage we have been handed, but in the words of the latest government slogan, we must "be aware" that this is not our prime task.

Finally, we should, perhaps, spend a few moments thinking about what at first sight is a slightly odd interjection in today's main story, when Peter sees John following them, and asks 'What will happen to him?' There is more than a hint of jealousy on the part of Peter – John was the disciple closest to Jesus at the last supper. I think that the important message for us is that should not compare ourselves with others. In modern parlance Jesus essentially told Peter 'mind your own business' but he did not stop there but followed it up with 'your business is to follow me'. We, who want to answer Jesus' question 'do you love me' in the affirmative have been given both an enormous privilege and challenge to carry on his work in our world, in our time. We cannot say 'Oh, that's the job of the vicar'. Our clergy have accepted one particular type of responsibility and task but Jesus, in questioning Peter, asks exactly the same question of each of us, and when we say that we love him, he will give us exactly the same answer: 'feed my sheep' and 'follow me'.