

Easter 2 (John 20. 19-23)

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The early Christians described their proclamation Jesus's resurrection from the dead as 'good news' – and indeed it is. Among other things, the resurrection reveals that all the things Jesus had stood for and done in his life – his compassion for the sick and suffering, his hospitality towards the socially and morally suspect, his solidarity with those the religious establishment condemned – all this has been vindicated by God. The civil and religious authorities, Jew and Gentile, have conspired together to put Jesus to death in the name of good social order and orthodox doctrine, the 'law'. But by raising him from the dead, God shows that it is *Jesus*, not these authorities, who speaks truly, *Jesus* who lives God's compassionate meaning in the world and so reveals who God really is.

This act of God has profound ramifications for the whole of human life, including all the ways we have of categorising each other into 'in' and 'out', 'good' and 'bad'. The resurrection is God's judgement, not only of those who condemn and betray Jesus in the name of these categories, but of all human systems that condemn and cast out, relying on violence and ultimately death to enforce their power and control. But, and here is where the resurrection is good news, God's judgement is of a different order than the judgement Jesus suffered. It is judgement, not as condemnation and rejection, but judgement which takes the form of forgiveness and peace. Jesus returns to his disciples, those who betrayed and failed him, offering forgiveness and pointing them towards a radically new possibility for community, a way of living together which no longer has to be based on the fear of death and the

threat of not belonging. For there is now nothing that lies beyond the reach of God's redeeming love and life. Good news indeed!

And yet, the more I ponder the resurrection – and how this news was first experienced by the disciples – the more I realise that resurrection is not just uncomplicated rejoicing and relief, not just the chance to be happy again because the tough times are over. It is in fact, a profoundly dis-locating and dis-orienting experience – one of those experiences that leaves you feeling as if all your old reference points are gone and so exposed and vulnerable, not really knowing how to be in this new place, not having lived into your new skin. And noticing that element of the resurrection stories makes a big difference, I think, to how we interpret and understand aspects of our own experience of God, or how we might recognise the Spirit of God at work in our lives. So let me say a little more about that.

With the crucifixion of Jesus, his death and burial, the disciples are left in no-man's land. In his company, they have been taken beyond the bounds of orthodox religious belonging and public law-keeping. Remember all those Sabbaths broken, that unauthorised fellowship with the outcast! And yet, the new belonging they had dimly anticipated – positions of honour in some new Israel, established by God with fire and legions of angels – has utterly failed to materialise. Jesus has simply died in dishonour, like any ordinary criminal or deluded false messiah. So the disciples are now outsiders to the world they had known and in which they had sourced their identity, and no new structure for living or identity has been given them. They are adrift and they are afraid.

By the time of our reading, Mary Magdalene has brought the news of the empty tomb and her encounter with the risen Jesus, but it is clear that this has brought no immediate relief or resolution. How, indeed, could they be expected to make anything of it? So, on the evening of this day of resurrection, 'the first day of the week' John says (meaning, the first day of the new creation), the disciples are still huddled behind locked doors, afraid of the authorities and apparently with no sense

at all of what the future holds. The resurrection has already happened, but they remain in a place of total exhaustion, confusion and emptiness.

And it is into *this* place, both physical and existential, that Jesus comes, arriving in their midst without any obvious means of access (the doors are locked) and not because of anything they do. He stands among them and says 'Peace be with you', and after that shows them his hands and his side, his wounds to signify theirs perhaps? Only then, it seems, do the disciples realise that it is Jesus standing there. 'Then the disciples rejoiced *when* they saw the Lord' John writes. And 'Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you"'.

Imagine, even now, what this might have been like for the disciples. On the one hand, they rejoice – even if bewilderedly. God knows how, but it seems that Jesus, their friend and beloved teacher, is somehow alive, somehow with them, and offering them peace – bringing the peace that he always brought, the peace that the world cannot give. On the other hand, *they* are still completely stuffed. They have lost their jobs or left them behind, they have no way back into their identities as good Jewish boys and girls, they are stuck in a foreign and hostile city, displaced and probably with little means of support. How are they supposed to live from now on? Because whatever the return of Jesus means, it still doesn't seem to mean the triumphant establishment of a new Israel in which they will have positions of authority and respect.

And it is in *this* place – a place of utter undoing, a no-place really – that Jesus breathes upon them the Holy Spirit. This is the same Spirit of God by which Jesus himself had been inspired at his baptism and sent out into the desert, and by which he now sends them. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. But notice what a gentle, non-dramatic giving this is. In the preaching of the church, the resurrection is often described as a *victory* over death, a *conquering* of sin, a *triumph* of love over evil. There is a sense in which this is absolutely true. Love does win; the life of God does prevail over death and so set us free from death's dominion. But a danger in

these metaphors, with their competitive and even militaristic associations, is that we falsify the *experience* of resurrection and *our* reception of resurrection life through the Spirit of the risen Christ. Because it seems to me that in the first instance, this encounter and reception very often feels *not* like a victory, but the strange peace that comes when we finally acknowledge our defeat, the merest breath of newness that arrives when we are utterly dis-placed and empty. It is marked by feelings of rawness and tenderness more than triumph.

And I think it is only when we hear this as its context, that we can begin to make sense of the final sentence of our reading: 'If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'. For those who are utterly broken open and empty, utterly dependent upon Jesus's presence and gift for any possibility of renewed life, then righteous condemnation of others for their sin and failure is not a natural movement. I suspect that the only sense in which 'sin' can be retained, blocked from release, is when the 'sinner' themselves is unable to allow this emptying, displacing, tender gift of the Spirit to sweep through their life. And if this is so, then perhaps the instruction to 'retain' sin on behalf of another is not so much a license to condemn, as simply to allow that we who have known our own heart-brokenness and emptiness may encourage others to admit to their own brokenness, and so become capable of authentic receptivity.

The resurrection is indeed good news. But ultimately it is news whose glad tidings can be realised within and among us, only as we follow Jesus in refusing the usual ways of ordering human community and identity around condemning judgement and the fear of death. And to refuse these ways, to trust that God is bigger than our human categorisations of righteous and unrighteous, in and out, is often enough to find yourself condemned or cast out, or left with no cheap way to secure your identity or place in the world.

So if this Easter-tide you find yourself more empty than triumphant, more unknowing than sure, more bruised and tender than confidently victorious – then

take heart – for so it was with those first disciples in the upper room. We are met in our brokenness and not elsewhere by the peace of Christ; and only in our emptiness may we receive the Spirit of the living God who commissions us to continue his work of love in a still hostile world.

For Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**