

2025 TALK – EASTER SUNDAY, LUKE 24:1-12, 13-35

OPENED EYES & BURNING HEARTS

Let us start my talk with applause... This is to give thanks to God for Nana, Ruhama & Robbie... (applause). This applause is to give thanks for what God has been doing in their lives... (applause). This applause is to celebrate the wonderful truth that these 3 young people have already started walking with Jesus... (applause). This applause is to celebrate the fact that by being baptised this Easter day at Carey, they are publicly confirming their intention to follow Jesus from this day forward... (applause).

That's the best way to begin any preach – by celebrating & giving thanks for what God has done in Jesus. And now I want to address my opening remarks directly to the three of you, Ruhama, Robbie & Nana. It's a long time ago (over 40 years ago), but I just about remember what it was like to be a young Christian, just starting on a life of faith with Jesus. I'm sure you also have a sense of excitement at all the possibilities. All that God might do, all that you might become as you live a life trusting in God. Knowing God wants to bless you abundantly. Our God is a God who can open doors no-one else can open. Alleluia! Our God is a God who broke open the tomb of Jesus no less. Alleluia!

I am sure, despite all that is going on in our world right now, that you feel this sense of excitement & anticipation today. As followers of Jesus, we have this 'living hope'. There is so much to discover, so much to explore about life with God in this world. The last gospel in the Bible, John's gospel, ends with these words: 'all the libraries in the world are not big enough to contain all the books that could be written about what God has done in Jesus'... As my wife & my daughters will tell you, I am a great lover of books. So I could get very carried away about this. But before I do, I have to say this: books are great, but with Jesus there is no substitute for lived experience, for the encyclopaedia of life. God has two books, not one: there's the book of the Bible, then there's the book of creation - the book of life. As the great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon once said: 'We can discover so much when we hold scripture in one hand and a newspaper in the other'. God's creation shed's light on scripture & scripture sheds light on our lives.

So now, let's turn together to think about this amazing Easter story in Luke 24. This story of a devastated group of people in a small room, hearing some

strange news. A story of two miserable people walking along road, getting into conversation with a stranger. Make no mistake, the story of Easter is strange. A tale loaded with terrible tragedy, but also with God's deep sense of humour. Is the story of Jesus a tragedy – or a divine comedy? Well it's both of course...

Luke 24 reminds us powerfully of two contrasting truths:

1) Firstly - Following Jesus is problematic & will bring us the grief & loss of sacrifice: living by faith is very difficult & an enormous challenge...

2) Secondly – Following Jesus brings amazing rewards; living each day with Jesus means living every day with the hope of new life, new discoveries...

In the first 12 verses of Luke 24 what do we find? A small group of disciples who are hopelessly confused, trying to make sense of their lives & where they find themselves... Let's not forget. All these men & women vividly remember all that Jesus had done. They also remember the words of Jesus, including his promise that he would one day 'rise from the dead' (whatever that meant...!). But even when the women find the tomb empty, still they are all wondering... Fumbling & stumbling around, both physically & mentally, in the half-light of that new dawn. They are still only just beginning to get to grips with the relevance of Jesus' words to their lives right then.

This is where lots of people find themselves right now. The majority of the population of the UK cannot see the relevance of Jesus to today... Most people in this country are not in church on Sunday morning for this very reason. And there may well be a whole number of other reasons too... But one of the primary reasons why most people struggle with faith in Jesus is this sense of disconnect. That was then, this is now. People feel: 'How can someone who lived 2,000 years ago really be meaningful & relevant to life today?' ... And as we see from Mary & Peter here in Luke 24, on that first Easter morning, Christians can also share in this sense of disbelief.

The first Christians (& many, many Christians since) have asked themselves: 'How CAN I live by faith, when these terrible things have just happened?... WHERE is this 'God of love', when my whole life seems to have just fallen apart...?' That was the experience of those first disciples. And it is sometimes our experience too.

And then there's those 2 disciples, beyond Jerusalem, on the Road to Emmaus. These two are seemingly walking away from their commitment to follow Jesus. But they too are just like the other disciples. Just as confused. Equally as unable to believe the words of Jesus. Unable to understand the meaning of the news the women have brought them, that the tomb of Jesus is empty. 'What on earth can all this mean...?' Just three days ago they felt they had the world at their feet. They had hoped that, together with Jesus, they would play a part in 'redeeming Israel'. Jesus was their hope for their nation, for their own people. It seemed to them that Jesus was on the threshold of setting everything right about their chaotic & troubled lives... A world at war, their nation being ruled & disturbed by powerful forces from elsewhere, their people without any true sense of direction... (Does this begin to sound familiar...?).

And now this... They had just witnessed the One who they were committed to following, executed in the most humiliating & horrible way. All Jesus' followers were experiencing PTSD. Post - Traumatic – Stress - Disorder.

They are still just beginning to make some sense of all this, along with this latest news of the empty tomb. And a stranger greets them on the road & joins their journey. And as they walk together, it seems this guy doesn't know any of what has happened in Jerusalem. So they both bring him up to speed. It all comes tumbling out. The stranger listens intently to their curious tale of woe. He spends a long time listening... And then... Then what is the first thing this stranger says to them?...

'How foolish you are & how slow to believe...'. Sounds a bit harsh doesn't it? He's listened well to all they have told him, but his first words in response are far from comforting or reassuring. I wonder, how many of us LIKE to think of ourselves as 'foolish', or 'slow'... ? Hands up anyone...?! Do you LIKE to think of yourself as foolish or slow... ?

BUT, having said that, we may readily admit that we are 'slow to believe'... How easy is it to believe that Jesus rose from the dead?... We could ask Robbie & Ruhama & Nana this same question... But I'm not going to put them on the spot again, so soon after baptising them...! But this question is, if you like, THE question for Easter. THE question for all Christians & all people.

And I'm going to try to offer us an answer to the question. Firstly, I would say that the story of Easter tells us that believing in Jesus isn't ever 'easy'. Believing

that Jesus rose from the tomb & triumphed over death is not 'straightforward'. We each have to join in the reaction of one man who met with Jesus earlier in the gospels. This man, faced with the awful news of the seeming death of his daughter, said to Jesus: 'I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief'...

The second thing to say about how today, we can believe in the resurrection of Jesus is this: it is a lot easier when you begin to understand who Jesus is & why Jesus came to our world. I have to confess that there are many times in the past I have been slow to believe. (Of course, I can still be slow to believe today). It took me 18 years before I came to faith in Jesus. Many of those years I went to church & Sunday School. Many of those years I struggled to believe much of these Bible stories. And I still find myself struggling to believe some of these stories... But what always helps me is that I share in the experience of those two disciples on the Road to Emmaus... I know that Jesus is not **just** a figure in history. Jesus walks & talks with me today. Someone who, as with Cleopas & his companion in Luke 24, I get to regularly share a meal with.

Later, after our service, we will share together in a meal which will include bread & wine to remember Jesus' Last Supper. And you all can share in this part of our later refreshments, whatever your belief or unbelief. Or you can indeed choose not to eat the bread & wine, if you prefer. More of this a bit later.

I will close my talk with a personal reflection. And then a reflection on the experience of Nana, Robbie & Ruhama. My personal reflection is this. Just last week I visited Hadrian's Wall. The same Roman Empire which built that amazing feat of engineering is the same Empire which colluded in nailing Jesus to a cross. You can go and visit that wall, see for yourself many evidences of Roman rule. So, in historical terms the life & death (& claimed) resurrection of Jesus are not that far removed from us... In the grand scheme of things.

But to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, you need to see something more. Robbie, Nana & Ruhama (like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus) have each seen the risen Jesus. Their eyes have been opened; their hearts have burned within them, because God has spoken to them. They will tell you - once you see the Risen Christ, you cannot 'unsee him'. Once you have experienced the overwhelming love of God in Jesus, you want to go further & discover more...

If you are not sure today what you believe about Easter & about Jesus, God is inviting you to find out more. Best way to do this, is to read one of the gospels

of Jesus. So I encourage you to pick up this gospel of John & commit to reading it... – as well as the other stories here of how a number of people were helped by God during WWII, by reading the Bible. Jesus delights to listen to our stories; he wants to listen to you, to walk with you & talk with you today... Thanks be to God for the good news of Easter. Thanks be to God for the hope of new life which Jesus offers each of us today....