

Transforming Life - for All People

Readings

Reading: Luke 24:36b-48

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.



⁴⁴ Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.'

Reading: Acts 8:26-40

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' ³¹ He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.'

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water!'

What is to prevent me from being baptised?' ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptised him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Hear what God's Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God

Listening for God's Voice

Reflection

Ever-present God, we desire your transformative spirit among us. Yet, we confess that many times we only stare, mouths gaping and knees trembling, at the sight of your miraculous presence. Forgive us for when we stand in disbelief. Fill us with Christ's peace, Peter's conviction, and the healed one's joy so we may be your witnesses. Amen.

These readings offer us two important aspects of Christian life and hope for us to reflect upon. First, we have Luke's account of Jesus appearing to the disciples.

Over the past 2 weeks, we have heard how the gospel attributed to John described Jesus' appearances.

Here in Luke's gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples right after the two who had gone to Emmaus return with their news of seeing Jesus on the road and sharing a meal with them.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus doesn't just show his wounds to Thomas but to the whole group. In Luke's gospel we have this emphasis on Jesus not being some spiritual being (a ghost), but present in bodily form - with wounds visible, hungry, eating and drinking with them.

And the disciples - are both full of joy, and yet still in disbelief and filled with questions (24:21).

And isn't that the way it goes when we are confronted with something that is just so amazing that we are really excited but not quite sure if we dare to believe it is true, and we are filled with a whole bunch of questions that need answers before we will really commit to believing??

And that's OK! Into the amazement, and questions and wonderment, comes Jesus, breathing peace, slowing us down, inviting us to take time to process and to enter the new possibilities that come with the news of the risen Christ.

There are some in the Christian church who question whether Jesus was raised in bodily form.

After all, even Jesus' closest friends didn't recognise him at first, and he seems to have this troubling ability to get through locked doors. But this account from Luke's gospel, and John's story about Thomas, both point to the importance of Jesus being with them in person - real - with real wounds that could be touched and real human need for food and drink.

These accounts testify to the presence of the risen Christ in our midst - even when our heads are struggling to catch up with what is happening around us, the risen Christ meets us, breathing peace.

The second reading is one we would normally hear in a couple of weeks time. Now I would have to say that for a long time, I never really understood the importance of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian man except insofar as it presented the joy of baptism as one comes to understand the Scriptures and the presence of the risen Christ.

But when we look more closely at this story, it is so much more...

Central to this story is that the good news of the risen Christ is for everyone - no matter who they are or what our assumptions about them might be.

The story begins with Philip being prompted by God to be on his way and taking a road that was a bit out of the way, "a wilderness road" (8:26). As he travels he comes across an Ethiopian eunuch.

Now what do we know about this man, certainly not his name...

To begin with he is a man of colour - he is Ethiopian.

And he is a very powerful man - a leader in the Queen's court.

He is likely highly educated - to be in charge of the Treasury you would, presumably, need to be able at least to add up.

He is also well-traveled - Jerusalem is a good distance from his home in Ethiopia. Presumably this is how he has been drawn to read the Scriptures of the Hebrew people as he has encountered them trading in Jerusalem.

And he is a man whose sexuality has been modified - eunuchs were created - a way of ensuring loyalty to their task.

So when we look closely at this man who studies the Scriptures, listens to Philip's explanation and then demands to be baptised, we see an educated, man of colour with a sexuality that was not "the norm".

And in the middle of nowhere, along the wilderness road, he is baptised and goes on his way rejoicing.

Right here, at the very beginning of the early Church, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, embraces this man, who in no way fits any assumptions of who a follower of Jesus might be.

He is not Jewish. He does not keep the Jewish law - in fact, being a eunuch means that he would be excluded from the Temple.

Right here, all of Jesus' teaching about embracing people who are excluded, who are different, who don't fit the moulds we make - right here, Jesus' teaching and loving is affirmed and enacted.

This story is about so much more than baptism - it explodes our ideas of who is "worthy" - a heart wanting to know Jesus is more than enough.

There is no requirement that anyone should be like us, or keep the laws we have made - it is only about a desire to respond to the Good News of the risen Christ and to seek the way of Christ for themselves.

As we seek to be the body of Christ in this part of the world, how then do we live out the joy of the risen Christ, inviting one another to experience the presence of Christ in our midst, transforming our assumptions and expectations, breathing peace and inviting every one of God's children into fullness of life?

Let us pray...

Risen Christ, there are times when we simply can't get our heads around what we are seeing and hearing from you. When that happens, breathe your peace, and help us to respond from our hearts, offering wounded hands to everyone who seeks your love and grace. Amen.

Rev Kath Merrifield

18 April 2021