

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, April 3, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 150; John 20:19-31
“Up from the grave He arose”

Every now and then – actually it would be more accurate to say most Sundays – as we are driving home after the service, Cathy will tell me something that one of the church school students said during their class time. One or more of three things form my usual reaction.

Either I am reminded once again of the words in Matthew 21:16: *Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise.* Or I am struck once again by the wisdom and innocence of youth that I, hardened old cynic that I am, have lost sight of. Or I am left in awe of how deeply and seriously our church school students think as they grow in faith and understanding. But most of all, I thank God that people like Cathy and our church school teachers are there to answer the kind of questions that the students come up with.

The question that prompted that train of thought came last Sunday, when the lesson was – as might be expected on Easter Day – about the resurrection. The question was: how can you prove that it really happened?

I don't know exactly how Cathy answered it, but several ways come to my mind. Though I confess that not all of them may be at the right level for a conversation with a church school student. The presence of the risen Christ in the life of his follower, perhaps, or the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The faithful witness, prayers and service of the Christian church in the world. The way lives have been changed and enriched and blessed and remade down through the centuries. And of course, the witness of Scripture and the encounters with Jesus that his followers had that we read about there.

Which brings us to today's Gospel lesson and to doubting Thomas, as he is usually referred to. John is the only Gospel writer to tell the story of the disciples, all except for Thomas, skulking behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, and Jesus suddenly appearing to them, and Thomas doggedly refusing to accept what they told him *'unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side ...'* John 20:25, then a week later, meeting Jesus, seeing for himself, and declaring Jesus to be *'My Lord and my God!'*

Does that really justify calling Thomas, as he is so often called, doubting Thomas? I have to say that I think that's a bit unfair. The human reaction to something we have never experienced before is almost always wonder. Amazement. Scepticism. Fear. Incredulity. And yes, maybe a bit of doubt. Not all of these are present in John's account, but if we look at the four Gospel accounts of the first Easter day, they are all there to be found.

Mark says that when Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body, they found the stone sealing the tomb had already been rolled back. A young man, dressed in a white robe, was sitting there; *and they were alarmed* Mark 16:5. And after he spoke to them, they *fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid* Mark 16:8.

Matthew says that it was Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who went to see the tomb. There was an earthquake; an angel of the Lord came down and rolled back the stone, sat on it, and spoke to them.

And the women left the tomb *quickly with fear and great joy* Matthew 28:8.

Luke says that it was *Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them* who went to the tomb – Luke 24:8. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, and *they were perplexed about this*. And when two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them, the women were *terrified and bowed their faces to the ground* Luke 24:3-5. Luke also says that when Jesus appeared to his disciples later that same day, *they were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost* Luke 24:37.

John says that when Mary was left alone in the garden after she found the stone removed and the body missing, and after Simon Peter and the other disciple had come and gone, she *stood weeping outside the tomb* John 20:21. So overcome was she that *she did not know that it was Jesus* John 20:14.

And in maybe the most human reaction of all, though it has come to have a profound symbolic message to it, John says that after all that had happened, Simon Peter, Thomas the Twin, Nathanael of Cana, James and John the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples just didn't know what to do, so they reverted to what was most familiar to them, something they were most comfortable doing: they went fishing – John 21:3.

So there we have them. The human reactions to something they had never experienced before, something so far beyond their comprehension that it staggered their minds with the sheer impossibility of it all. Doubt. Fear. Incredulity. Alarm. Terror. Terror again. Terror a third time. Amazement. Joy. Perplexity. Startlement. Tears. Sadness. Confusion. A search for familiarity, comfort, stability. All very naturally human reactions to a supernaturally divine act.

I don't know about you, but one of the reasons why I find the Scriptural witness to the resurrection so convincing is that these reactions are so natural and human. And so different. If the story had been identical in all four Gospels, and if the reactions of the first witnesses to the resurrection had been an immediate "OK, yup, that's what happened, I understand, I believe," the whole thing would have sounded incredibly phony, contrived, the kind of thing that conspiracy theorists would love to get their teeth into.

But it's not so. The accounts don't match in every detail. They are different, varied, inconsistent in places, and very obviously not carefully planned and meticulously crafted to present a single unified version of the resurrection story. And for that very reason, I find them convincing, persuasive, authentic.

Would I have been able to explain all that in a way that would be understood by the church school student who asked Cathy the question I opened with? I'm not sure. Would I have reacted any differently from the way Thomas reacted, knowing what he did back then, when the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord? Frankly, I'm not sure that I would. Would I react any differently now? Yes, I certainly would.

Because I and you and all of us have heard and come to believe the good news that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And through believing we have life in his name.

'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' John 20:30. Thanks be to God!