

# Sermon – Sunday 7 April 2024



## Readings:

### Acts 4: 32-35

The lectionary programme suggests we read the book of Acts between Easter and Pentecost but the order is disrupted by the two Sundays of Ascension and Pentecost. Therefore, we begin with a vision of the building of the early church community. Significantly this was a community that supported one another and gave themselves totally to the new community. We could argue that this was because they expected Jesus to return within their lifetime and create a new world order, so individual property was meaningless.

However, it might also be true that, after Jesus' death, his commitment and his refusal to compromise even in the face of death refocused them on the values of Jesus, so they truly saw a new way of being, and a real possibility of living the realm of God into reality.

### John 20:19-31

This is a private transfer of the Holy Spirit which makes a wonderful counterclaim to those Christians who demand a public 'Pentecostal' experience.

The disciples meet the risen Christ in a locked room and he breathes on them and says 'receive the Holy Spirit'. True to the narrative construction we find in the gospel genre this episode connects with the first chapter of John's Gospel. In that Gospel ask, 'Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah nor Elijah, nor the prophet'. In verse twenty-six onwards John then says 'I baptise with water. Among you stands one of whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' (John 1: 26-32)

Then the following day John points out Jesus and describes seeing the Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism. John concludes by saying that he heard the divine voice proclaiming that the one he saw the Spirit descend upon the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit. (John 1:31-34)

## Sermon

Fredrik Backman wrote a book called *A man Called Ove*. Tom Hanks liked the story, so he made a movie. He called the central character Otto and set the story in the United States. It was still a good story, but it lost some of the magic of the original Swedish setting.

That is the problem we have with the biblical narrative as we try and make sense of the stories from our setting in 21<sup>st</sup> century Aotearoa.

But as we look at today's readings, and particularly our Gospel reading, Backman can help our imaginations find truth in the mystery of story.

Fredrik Backman also wrote a book called. *My Grandmother Sends Her Regards And Apologises*.<sup>1</sup>

In that book story is used to prepare seven-year-old Elsa for life without her grandmother, who has not only been her major caregiver but also her only friend. Through fairy stories that happen in 'the land of almost awake' Grandmother, who is dying of cancer, explains her past life as a doctor in the world's trouble spots. She also introduces Elsa to the people who she has rescued and housed in their apartment building and apologises for being an inadequate mother to Elsa's mother.

All those stories happen in 'the land-of-almost-awake.' So why don't we imagine the incident described in John's Gospel and even our Acts reading happening in the same place?

'When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said 'Peace be with you''. (John 20:19)

Imagine the disciples in a state of shock following Jesus' execution. The women had told the disciples that the tomb was empty and Peter and another disciple had verified that fact. But then the women also claimed that they had seen the Risen Christ.

Therefore, it is reasonable that the disciples should meet together to talk about all the recent experiences. They are most likely tired. I can't imagine they slept well after Jesus was arrested, tortured to death, and buried. Now his body has vanished and there is also this unlikely story about the women meeting with him.

Author, Fredrik Backman described his new life after the success of *A man Called Ove*. He had to travel extensively, and he had trouble sleeping away from the chaos of his family life. He even thought of asking the hotel staff to hide some Lego in his bed to make him feel more at home.

I can imagine that with all that had happened the disciples would be well and truly disorientated, and Lego hadn't been invented.

Furthermore, anyone who has been through the death of someone close to them will remember that unreal time were life goes past in a sort of daze.

I can certainly imagine the disciples feeling like that. Then, to add to the confusion, they would also be afraid. They would be afraid that the authorities would look to round them up and execute them as Jesus' followers. That's what happens in our world after an insurrection or terrorist attack. The police or soldiers hunt out anyone associated with the perpetrators.

The disciples would also be apprehensive about what they might do next. Should they carry on the mission journey Jesus had brought them on?

I imagine they would want to avoid any disturbances in the temple with the merchants and the money changers. Or should they just go back to what they did before. The final episode in John's Gospel suggests that some of them did that.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredrick Backman, Translation Henning Koch *My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologises* (London: Sceptre 2015)

It was a time for the disciples when real things happen, but everything also seems unreal.

Nothing would seem to connect with the busy world of everyday life. It would sometimes be hard to make the distinction between being asleep and being awake. It was a time that could easily feel like 'the land-of-almost-awake.'

Of course, we don't know exactly what happened immediately after Jesus' death and all the gospel accounts vary. But all the Gospels tell us something important.

John's Gospel is the last of the four gospels to be written so he may also be drawing on the sort of 'land-of-almost-awake' imagery to connect his resurrection account with the experiences of his readers.

The important thing for us is what we draw from this story that connects us with the Risen Christ. Many of us will have, or still might have, a time when we felt we were in the presence of the risen Christ. It could be a time we might describe as 'the land of almost awake.' We might have been reading a gospel episode and our mind pictured what that scene might have been like, and the power of the story opens a new insight to us. We might have put the Bible down and thought, 'What does that mean for me?'

We may have been deep in reflective prayer and suddenly felt we were in the presence of the Risen Christ.

We can also be with a crowd listening to an evangelical preacher and felt compelled to come to the front or cry out in some way to demonstrate the action of the Spirit in our life. An experience that reflects Luke's Pentecost episode.

But this reading from John tells us there is a quieter way of meeting with Christ which can be just as meaningful.

This passage also tells us that questioning and doubt can be an important part of accepting Christ in our life.

In this Gospel episode Thomas was not at the first appearance of the Risen Christ and he would not accept a second-hand account. However, that second hand account probably made him more open to his acceptance of the Risen Christ in the second appearance described.

But we should not get too involved in the details of the story and, just as Elsa used her grandmother's fairy stories as a guide to the reality of her world, so we can use the biblical stories to learn about our world.

A good portion of us can identify with Doubting Thomas. We also believe we are unlikely to come face to face with a reconstituted Jesus with nail holes in his hands and a fatal wound in his side.

However, we can recognise the power of story along with the place of hyperbole and metaphor. Therefore, we can understand that John is first of all trying to tell his readers that the experience of the Risen Christ is in some unexplainable way, real.

For those first disciples Christ was both a presence that cannot be excluded by locking the door and yet real enough not to be dismissed as a hallucination.

For a whole lot of reasons, our experience of the Risen Christ is always going to be different to the experience of those first disciples.

But the inclusion of Thomas not only reassures us that doubt is normal it also allows John to give Jesus a very important piece of dialogue.

Jesus said to him 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'. (John 20:29)

That is an important statement for John's community somewhere around 100 years after Jesus' death. It is also extremely important for us more than 2000 years after Jesus' death.

Whatever a meeting with Christ is for us we need to live as Christ to others. That is where the readings from Acts are so helpful because that book describes the action of the first followers of Jesus.

However, we must still look for the message in the story rather than treat the text as an instruction manual. It is also a story wrapped in the mists of time. A story that time has put into of 'land-of-almost-awake.' A time before covid, cost of living crisis, redundancy, and global warming.

Today's reading continues the theme of caring for others that is so much part of the Gospel message. Jesus' 'kingdom of God' calls us to acknowledge the reality that humanity is a communal species.

So, although today's Act's reading could be seen as an alternative expression of Karl Marx' 'From each according to his ability to each according to his needs,' it is a story that suggests that caring for each other is the way to change the world. The rich getting richer while the poor get poorer is not the way God intends us to live and Jesus is not alone in recognising that we are a cooperative species.

That is a biological reality that is not exclusively Christian. The Bantu term for humanity is Ubuntu that is often translated as 'I am because we are.'

Desmond Tutu is quoted as saying Ubuntu speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself.

But as idealistic as the Act reading sounded it belonged in the 'the land of almost awake'. Over two thousand years of Christian history tells us that although there have been, and continue to be, self-contained Christian communities where all things are held in common, Christian mission involves living in the world.

The disciples that met Christ in that locked room were sent out to make Christ real in a hostile world by living as Christ to others.

The book of Acts moves from the 'land of almost awake' of today's reading, to the mission of Paul and the success and failure of the early church.

Christ may well come to us in that mystical world where fantasy and reality meets but we are sent back into the world of cost-of-living crises, mortgages, bits of Lego in uncomfortable places, and global warming.

The Spirit may well be breathed into us in the land of almost awake, but we are sent back into the world of very much awake to live as Christ to others.