

We Are Witnesses
Sunday 26th April 2020

Talk by Andrew Griffiths, prayers by Margaret Davies

Luke 24 – You are witnesses

Hi, I'm Andrew and thanks for downloading this Sunday's talk from St John's Church Penge.

I am going to start with a reading from Luke 24, before giving a short talk on it. Afterwards, Margaret will lead our prayers before we end.

Luke 24:36-49

³⁶ As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" ³⁷ But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸ And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit 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 And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marvelling, 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 before them.

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 and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

I really love history.

I studied history at university, I have an MA in church history and am now doing a history PhD.

I have a full height bookcase dedicated to history books – not just that, it is full and I need another one.

Alex might disagree with that last statement, but it is clearly true.

I really love history.

I love it because it has the best stories – of warlords like Bohamond of Torrance, who in the first crusade claimed to have seen visions of angelic hordes as he conquered Antioch; of a sixteenth century woman, overthrowing another woman to become queen, only to die and be succeeded by another woman as queen, whose worst enemy was another rival woman queen who was eventually beheaded, all in the midst of the deeply sexist and conservative English society five hundred years ago – that's Jane, Mary, Elizabeth and Mary, enacting the mother of all family squabbles; and of pacifist movements bringing an end to the biggest and most exploitative empire in history (I'll leave you to work that one out!).

I also love history because of what it tells us about us – how we react to the stories and what jumps out at us from them is different for every generation.

We are not just shaped by our history, but how we see our history – my last example is just one such story that changes the more angles we look at it from.

But the reason I love history most of all is because it has happened, it is tangible and however we view it, whatever theories we develop to explain why this or that happened, we are engaging with truth.

And this is no more so the case as it is with the resurrection of Jesus.

As our passage from Luke makes clear, the Christian faith is rooted in the truth, the historical and physical truth of the resurrection.

Without the physical and historical resurrection, Christian faith is empty, a shell and of no use.

Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.

¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Paul follows this up with the clear statement in verse 20: **But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead**

It is absolutely critical that Christian faith is grounded in historical fact.

It is not a philosophy; it is a belief in a physical reality – the reality of the risen Christ.

Belief in what happened and the consequent hope, trust and faith in the fulfilment of God's plan.

Luke emphasises this in a number of ways.

Firstly, he emphasised the physical connection between Jesus on the cross and the risen Christ.

Verses 38-40: Jesus said **'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit 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.'**

In doing so, Jesus is showing that he was the one who was on the cross, died and was buried – he is not a reincarnation or rather a 'spirit', as some of the disciples suggested, but the physical resurrected Christ.

So, Luke connects the risen Christ with the past.

And then he connects with the present: verse 41 and 42 - 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 before them.

By the common, and communal, activity of eating, Luke shows us that the risen Jesus is human just like us.

Luke connects the risen Christ, through our shared experience of eating, to our present.

And then he creates a connection with the long-term plan of God.

In verses 44-47 Luke tells how Jesus explained the great story of God’s salvation of the world, and His plan for the future.

In verse 45-47, it says Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

This both emphasises the importance of Scripture for understanding Christ, and connects Jesus to the whole of God’s great plan – past, present and future.

In doing all of this, Luke is clear – Jesus Christ physically rose from the dead, is entirely relevant to us now, and is the centre of God’s great plan to save the world.

One of the important things we need to recognise, and as I said at the beginning, is that history is always relational.

It is not a simple matter of working out what happened, but what it means for us.

In coming to history, to look at the sources we have – be those books, letters, stones and pots, or hearing from eyewitnesses – we always read into it what is important to us now.

It is why there is a huge increase in the number of books and studies on the role of women in society throughout the ages – we rightly recognise that this has not been explored as much as possible, but in doing so we put our current priority – women’s rights – onto sources that were not as concerned with it as we are now.

Because, the study of history is always a discussion between the past, the present and the future.

In fact, often we only really understand things when we take a historical view to it – who truly understood the implications of the 2008 financial crisis at the time?

It has taken time and reflection to build a consistent picture of what was happening and its impact on society.

And the same will be true for the current unprecedented Covid crisis we are facing.

And so, with Christ, in Luke we are told to engage with the historical fact of the resurrection, rather than to deal with the risen Christ as a thing of the past – He is relevant to us now.

That is why the passage ends in verses 48-49 with the call for us to be witnesses.

In our worship of, prayer to and reflection on the risen Christ, we are called to allow Him to change our lives – to become part of the historical truth of the gospel.

We are the witnesses, told to be the bearers of the good news of Christ.

And we are witnesses to both what happened then and what is happening in and around us now – Christ is risen, in the present tense.

He is risen then, and he is risen tomorrow – it is this fact of this historical and future reality so critical to our present.

We are called to be the witnesses to a risen Christ.

Let's pray and consider how we can continue the legacy of the church before us, and show that the relevance of our faith in Christ is still important – which is based on history, but is also alive as our risen Lord.

Risen Christ, you filled your disciples with boldness and fresh hope: strengthen us to proclaim your risen life and fill us with your peace, to the glory of God the Father. Amen

Now Margaret is going to continue in prayer:

The first verse of Psalm 106 says, " Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his love endures for ever."

O Lord God, our Holy Father in heaven, we come to you in awe and wonder, thanking and praising you for the creation of our world and that we are in your family because of our faith in you. Thank you for loving and caring for us.

However, we let you down by forgetting you, relying on ourselves, by doing and saying things we regret and not following you. Lord Jesus, please forgive us. Thank you for dying for us, taking our sin to put us right with God and for certainly rising from death and living Lord, giving us your Spirit to daily follow your will until we have eternal life with you in heaven. Thank you for forgiving us, Lord.

Our loving caring Lord you ask us to pray for your kingdom to come here on earth that your will may be done, so we pray at this devastating time for the whole world in the clutch of pandemic. Therefore, we pray that you give wisdom to those in authority and government to make the right decisions for our world to recover. We pray for success for the scientists working on tests and vaccines for the virus. Bless all the health staff, doctors, nurses, carers and those in essential services. Keep them safe and well with strength and energy in their work. We pray for all who are ill at this time, especially Val Beckway, Yvette Evans and Anthony Wedderburn. Please heal Val and Yvette's coronavirus and Val's broken leg. We pray for John and her daughters. Give peace in the worry. Thank you for Anthony's progress, preparing slowly to return to the community. Please Lord, comfort Yvette and family grieving the loss of her mother. Comfort Emma Blizzard and family bereaved by the death of her sister Nikki whose funeral is on Wednesday 29th. Dear Lord, we pray you will comfort all who have lost loved ones. Please reveal your goodness to us all at these tough times as we thank you for the people you have healed already.

Almighty God, we thank you for our church fellowship. Bless our leaders, Ian, Steve, Sue, our preachers and homegroups, keeping worship, prayer and support going on the phones and online. We thank you and pray for the food bank and debt counselling continuing. May all Christians be witnesses to you in

caring for the needy in mind, body and spirit. Give courage to those who are persecuted and keep them safe.

We pray you will bless Tracey and Jason Day and girls in Thailand working for you. Bless Jenny Archibald too in her work with refugees.

O Lord, sustain us all in our new living and working lives to be productive and positive, healthy and safe.

We conclude our prayers with the special prayer, the collect, for this Sunday:

Almighty Father,
who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples
with the sight of the risen Lord,
give us such knowledge of his presence with us,
that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life
and serve you continually in righteousness and truth;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord
who is alive and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Thank you everyone for listening, keep well and safe in the coming week.

God bless.