

**Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 30/3/08 10.00am**  
**Easter 2**  
**Acts 2:14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31**

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Today is traditionally called Low Sunday – not, I think, because of the attendance figures, but because after the big build up through Holy Week to our celebration of Easter, this morning can seem a little flat. Yet we celebrate the Resurrection not just on Easter Day, but every Sunday, the first day of the week when, as the evangelists tell us, the women went to the tomb and found it empty. As this was the day after the Sabbath, so from the very beginning the Church has met to worship on Sunday, not Saturday (although the early Jewish Christians did that as well, since they continued to go to the synagogue). So today is, if you like, the first echo of the resurrection, the first Sunday after Easter, when it is still fresh in our minds and all creation resounds with the joy of new life.

It probably didn't feel like that for the disciples, who were still trying to make sense of the events of the last two weeks. This morning's Gospel tells us of the first two Sundays in the life of the Church. On the first, Easter Day itself, in the evening, when they met in a house behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, their mood was hardly one of celebration. And yet Jesus came and stood among them – despite the locked doors – and said "Peace be with you". According to John, he breathed on them then and there, saying "Receive the Holy Spirit" – no need to wait fifty days for Pentecost, unlike Luke's account. But maybe that was the time it took for the Good News to sink in. The confident claims of Peter which we heard in our first reading – from the account of the day of Pentecost in Acts – presumably depended on careful study of the Jewish Scriptures which he cites and a more developed understanding of the Resurrection than he must have had on that first Easter Day, notwithstanding the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Yet all the seeds of this speech are there in John's account which, as some of the earliest Christian commentators noticed, goes right back to the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures and the book of Genesis: "Then the Lord God

formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” [Gen 2:7]. Jesus’ breathing on the disciples is surely intended to evoke the story of creation, with the re-creation of the apostles, giving them new life on Easter Day and sealing the resurrection with the gift of the Spirit: as you probably know already, ‘spirit’ and ‘breath’ are the same words in both Hebrew and Greek.

The parallels with Genesis don’t stop there. The gift of the Spirit is described as the power to judge: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” In Genesis, the story continues with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, whose fruit Adam and Eve are commanded not to eat. Yet the followers of Christ – if they are to judge justly – must already have the knowledge of good and evil, in order to forgive and retain sins. So in a way, we are back in Eden – but without that one prohibition, not to eat the fruit of that tree lest we die. And how has that come about? Through the death and resurrection of Christ.

You see, if we read this with Matthaean eyes, it becomes an extended prophecy. God says that eating the fruit brings death. The serpent says that it doesn’t. Adam and Eve eat it – and apparently the serpent is right: they don’t die, but they become like God, knowing good and evil. However, in Jesus this is reversed. Instead of humans becoming like God, God becomes human. And – pushing the knowledge of good and evil to the limit – Jesus dies on the cross. So the serpent is finally proved wrong, and God right: eating that fruit has led to death. Yet because Jesus has died this death, the fruit is now available for his followers without the original danger: through Christ we are a new creation which can put this knowledge to good use. What do you think? Maybe I’m trying to read too much into John. But, as we saw in the course on Matthew, the Gospels are complex compositions which are often far more closely connected with the Hebrew Scriptures than we have been led to expect.

Pushing this slightly further, then, after the experience of Easter, good and evil take on a different appearance. After all, Jesus doesn’t explicitly refer to “good” and “evil” in the Gospel account. He speaks of “forgiving” and

“retaining” sins. The knowledge of goodness is to be found in forgiveness, which ties in directly with the words from the cross which we heard in Holy week: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” So for the disciples, following Christ’s example, good can triumph over evil through forgiveness. And I suspect that this also offers an explanation for those who are unhappy with the idea of “retaining sins”: if our judgment is to be founded on the model of Jesus, then it is more likely to be based on forgiveness than retention. Nowhere is this more clearly set out than in the Lord’s Prayer (in the modern version, at any rate): “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” In such circumstances, I wouldn’t choose to retain anyone’s sins!

I haven’t left much time to talk about the second Sunday in this morning’s Gospel, which corresponds to today, but then I did preach about Thomas on this occasion last year. You may recall that I’m not happy with the traditional title “Doubting Thomas”, because he doesn’t doubt but explicitly refuses to believe. “Disbelieving Thomas” is a better description – and the translation of Jesus’ words as “Do not doubt but believe” is inadequate, if not plain wrong. The Greek is about opposites, and disbelief, not doubt is not the opposite of belief. There is a place for doubt in our faith; otherwise it would not be faith but certainty. However, as we have been considering forgiveness, we shouldn’t condemn Thomas. We’re not told that he actually did put his finger in the mark of the nails, and I suspect that he never got that far before proclaiming “My Lord and my God”. Furthermore, in fairness to him, I noticed this year that the first time the risen Jesus appears he makes a point of showing the disciples his hands and side. So Thomas hasn’t dreamt up this gruesome request out of nowhere, but based it on what his friends told him. And those words, “Have you believed because you have seen me” apply not just to him but to all the apostles.

So here we are, God’s people who have not seen and yet have come to believe. But the final irony is that, through believing, we do see God at work around and among us. And so we gather today to celebrate again the resurrection and to be drawn ever further into the new life that Jesus has made possible for us. Alleluia! Christ is risen!