

# Touch me and see

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 April 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 2B

Acts: 3: 12-19; Luke 24: 36b-4b

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

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On Easter Sunday at Pitt St, we heard two resurrection stories...the sparse, open-ended account from Mark's Gospel which concludes with the women so amazed and terrified that initially they told no-one what they had experienced - and then we also heard the story from John's gospel of Mary's intimate and re-assuring encounter with Jesus in the garden.

This week we continue to tell resurrection stories, this time from Luke's Gospel.

Today's story from Luke tells of the experience of the early community of Jesus' friends as that community came back to life. As it experienced resurrection. What they experienced was a transformation of the community's understanding of what had happened to Jesus, and of what had happened to them.

The Easter stories in all their variety were not written down until decades after Jesus' death. They are the product of the experience and reflection by Jesus' followers in the days, months, years and even decades after his death.

So this morning, let's imagine ourselves into the story, as Jesus' followers.

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Could it be true? We had been hearing reports all day - people were saying that after the horror of Jesus death on the cross, and the heart-breaking news from Mary and Joanna that his body was missing, that he was alive!

First the women had received a message from men in dazzling garments. Then Peter had run to the tomb and found it empty and the linen cloths lying there.

Later that day, two of our group were walking to Emmaus when a stranger joined them on the road. Our friends told the stranger about what Jesus taught and did, how he had lived, and how he had died, and the rumours that he was alive. The stranger interpreted the scriptures to them, and later when they invited him to join them for a meal, he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. And suddenly they realised that it was Jesus with them! And even though it was late, they went back to Jerusalem to tell the community of friends what they had experienced.

We all wanted to believe it, but we had our doubts. But then, while we were still talking, Jesus appeared to us!

He spoke calmly and gently saying: *"Peace be with you."*

Peace! Really? We were terrified. We didn't understand resurrection. We thought we were seeing a ghost.

Jesus asked us, *"Why are you frightened, and why don't you trust what you see?"* He pointed to his hands and his feet. And then he said, *"Touch me and see; touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."*

A sense of joy and amazement began to dawn among us. Yet still we wondered, could we believe? As if knowing this, Jesus spoke again.

*"Have you got anything to eat?"*

So we gave him some of our breakfast, some fish—and he ate it right in front of us. Surely a spirit couldn't eat bread with our friends at Emmaus and fish with us. Jesus was real, he was still with us.

Then, just as with our Emmaus friends, Jesus opened our hearts and our minds. It was amazing.

These events, now years ago, brought the Christ communities into being. Jesus told us it was our calling to tell everyone what we had seen and experienced. The responsibility seemed overwhelming, but then Jesus said, *"You are witnesses of these things"*. And he assured us that we were not alone, but that Divine presence would always be with us in all that we would be and do.

In time, we did begin to trust. We went back to Jerusalem to honour all that Jesus had revealed in his life and in his death, the love, the forgiveness, the call to repentance for all that was broken, the vision of God for the world; and we were caught - and we spent time reflecting on what it was that God was calling us to do now. We knew that trusting in the resurrection would change our lives and the lives of all of who were touched by it.

We told these stories and eventually they were written down.

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This story, from Luke's Gospel, is full of theological wisdom and reflection. It challenges us because it is clearly such a physical account of resurrection – the story teller is emphatic in insisting that what the disciples encountered was no mere ghost. This was flesh and blood. The wounds were visible. When offered hospitality, Jesus shared bread. When he was hungry, he ate fish for breakfast.

What actually happened after Jesus death is unknowable. We have doubts and we have questions. But our doubts and questions do not preclude us from mining the theological claims of Luke's gospel.

The story teller was making powerful claims. First, Jesus lives as the Risen Christ. He was to be found, not among the dead but among the living. His spirit remained with them.

The second powerful theological claim is that God had vindicated Jesus. God had said “yes” to all that Jesus had done and said. God had said no to the powers that executed him.

Biblical scholar Stephen Patterson says: “*The followers of Jesus did not believe in him because of the resurrection. They believed in the resurrection because they first believed in him and in the spiritual life he unleashed among them*” (in *The Historical Jesus Goes to Church*, Roy W. Hoover and Stephen J. Patterson eds, 2004, p. 121).

*They began to speak of his death in ways that affirmed his life. And they came to see he stood for something so important he was willing to give his life for it* (Patterson 2004, p. 127).

They believed that through his words they could know God’s words, and that through his life they could know God’s dream for human life in relation. They believed that the new order cultivated by Jesus before he was killed, could not be killed by any executioner.

They told the stories because they believed that those who heard them could respond to a resurrection invitation to live deeply and generously; to believe that another way of being, that is not the way of empire, is possible; to believe that we could all say yes to the vision of the dream of God in response to the Sacred yes of resurrection.

William Loader says of Luke’s resurrection stories: “*to fulfil the hope of the resurrection is to tell the story of Jesus. That means telling what he did, how he was rejected and then vindicated; and it is at the same time to live it by the power of the same Spirit, by doing good and bringing liberation for all.*” (William Loader web site).

The ‘truth’ of the resurrection stories are not about their historical facticity. Their ‘truth’ is rooted in the Divine Presence, which lives on for us, and through us and among us, today.

There are two additional theological points I want to make this morning.

One is about embodiment, about the theological significance of Jesus’ instruction to touch and see and Jesus’ eating fish for breakfast.

The other point is about the continuity and discontinuity between the male historical Jesus and the risen Christ.

Eating fish contradicts a resurrection that is spiritual and other-worldly. Luke presents a living, walking, talking, eating Jesus.

For many conservative Christians, physical resurrection is literally true and is proof that there will be a second coming. But attention to the variety of New Testament witnesses and the history of interpretation suggests there are other meaningful options that are open to us. I think Christ’s resurrected body, in this story, conveys this-worldly, life-affirming Christian understandings of salvation.

The debate about Jesus' humanity raged on for centuries in the face of Jewish doubts, pagan objections, and "other-worldly", spiritual Christian beliefs.

The doctrine of bodily resurrection expresses the affirmation that the earth creature formed "*from the dust of the ground*" (Gen. 2:7) is indeed good and is what God intended.

This is a remarkable and significant theological insight. Good is the body. Good is the earth. Whatever happened in the death of Jesus, and in the time after his death, does not make the body irrelevant. It does not make life on earth secondary to whatever, if anything, life after death might be. And salvation, redemption, liberation, however we name it, that must also be bodily, and must speak meaningfully to the conditions of human and planetary life.

Resurrection stories proclaim Christian hope - and a rejection of totalistic systems of thought that limit the vision of the future to the shape of what is probable - according to current realities that we experience.

Possibility beyond the probable is the nature of religious hope, a hope that is symbolized as the dream of God, the reign of God, the kingdom of God.

Our embodied selves are central to our hope. The body is our life. And it is in our body-selves that we encounter the promise of salvation or liberation.

To insist on the reality of the resurrected body is to demand that we accept our present reality as the place where transformations of ultimate significance can take place. And when we speak of the Body of Christ, we are reminded that this hope is not just for our individual body-selves but for the entire earth community.

The second theological point I want to make is a brief reference to a theological claim that I have made before: that the resurrected Christ is not limited by gender.

If our bodies matter, if salvation is to take place in our embodied lives, which is what physical resurrection stories are saying, then all our varied bodies with their genders, sexualities, sizes, colours and shapes matter.

While the historical Jesus was undoubtedly male, we are free to reimagine the Risen One as female, as transgender, as intersex, as queer. As disabled. As Aboriginal. As an asylum seeker held as a political prisoner.

In preaching and liturgy, I have used Rita Nakashima Brock's naming of the Risen One as Christa/Community. I've used this naming as a way of communicating this understanding of Christ that is more; of Christ that can include all of our realities.

Brock argues that our theological imagination of resurrection must not be limited to the historic figure of Jesus, however much it may draw on his inspiration and his teachings. On his life and on his death.

In naming resurrection as Christa/Community we open ourselves to the Risen One who lives now in the whole community; in the whole community that bears the dangerous memory of Jesus.

Resurrection hope is not about another world. It is focused on the redemption of this world.

Christ/Christa is risen in us all...in our beautiful body-selves...

Resurrection stories are told that we might go on in hope, accompanied by Divine Presence, connected in mutual community.

So hear the invitation to join in the work of the Spirit.

Hear the voice of Christa calling us to love our body-selves; our sometimes heart-broken, sometimes unwell, sometimes disabled, body-selves.

Here the call of Jesus! Calling us into a broken world that cries out for healing and hope through forgiveness, justice and compassion.

Hear the voice that after crucifixion promises peace.

Hear the voice that is inviting us to join her,

as she sings in our dreams:

*"meet me there."*

As she sings in our dreams: meet me there!

And we, in return, pray that Divine Presence will meet us here – and everywhere.