

RESURRECTION IS REAL!

Third Sunday of Easter

15th April 2018

Luke 24:36-43

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Frederick George Fisher was born in August 1792. He was foolish enough to trade in forged bank notes and was subsequently arrested, tried and sentenced to fourteen years transportation to Australia. After serving seven years of his sentence Fisher was released. He obtained some land near Campbelltown where a farm was established. Then one night Fred Fisher left his home never to be seen again.

Mystery and controversy reigned. Then some four months later a local man by the name of John Farely was crossing a small bridge that is now the intersection of Queen and Dumaresq Streets in Campbelltown. It was late at night and there sitting on the rail Farely saw an eerie figure bathed in light. This figure beckoned Farely and with a loud moan pointed towards a small paddock in the distance.

Farely was horror-struck. For, he realised he was looking at a ghost, the ghost of Fred Fisher. Moreover, subsequent investigations in the paddock that the ghost pointed to uncovered the missing body of the man himself buried in a shallow grave!

The story of Fisher's ghost has become a bit of legend in Sydney's southwest. Back in the 1950's people gathered near the small bridge at midnight on the anniversary of the ghost's appearance hoping to catch a glimpse of this strange fellow. Today things are more relaxed. Every November there is an annual festival in Campbelltown named after Fisher and his so-called ghostly appearance.

Ghost stories are very much part of the Australian legend. There is the Gurya Ghost, the Elizabeth Farm Ghost, the Gerringong Ghost, the Richmond Bridge Ghost and the Black Horse of Sutton's Forest just to name a few. And there are ghost tours through such places as The Rocks, Melbourne's Pentridge Prison and Sydney's Quarantine Station on North Head where hundreds of people died horrible deaths from infectious diseases.

Today we could interpret the reading from Luke's Gospel as yet another ghost story. On that first Easter Day, in Jerusalem, Jesus appears to a number of people.

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For some, this took place as they were walking to the village of Emmaus. And, as we read today, Jesus appears to others who were huddled together in the city, probably quite terrified by all the events that had just occurred.

Now, is this yet another ghost story?

Well, stories were rife that the body of Jesus was missing. Moreover, some had already claimed the crucified Jesus had appeared to them after his death! This is spooky stuff. I imagine many people were rather confused and unsettled.

Resurrection is a difficult, may I suggest, almost impossible thing to comprehend. That the dead can be raised to life goes completely against the grain of logic, reason and scientific enquiry. Some would say it's a crazy idea. It's simply insane. It just can't be!

Because of this, many prefer to approach the mystery we call resurrection as a spiritual thing. Here the body dies, the corpse decays but the spirit lives on. And beyond death it is the spirit that matters. Here the spirit cannot be contained by death. The spirit cannot be silenced. The spirit is free to be present among those who it chooses. And here we can approach today's reading, where Jesus appears among his friends, as a spiritual thing, as a spiritual apparition or a spiritual manifestation.

Resurrection can also be embraced as a metaphor, as a symbolic thing pointing to a reality and a truth that simply cannot be erased or extinguished by death. Here Jesus is said to be alive today in the form of his teaching and in the form of the truths he embraced and stood for – teachings and truths with a poignancy and power that can never be silenced, gagged or defeated.

Meanwhile, I was touched by a quote, part there-of which is written on the wall of a new crematorium chapel in Melbourne. It reads: *"Death ends a life, not a relationship. All the love you created is still there. All the memories are still there. You live on - in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here."*

What lives on here is the power of memory. What cannot be contained and subdued by death are those rich, meaningful bonds formed in life and now firmly fixed in the consciousness of those left behind. It's an affirming quote and one that is quite suitable for a chapel such as this.

Indeed, I believe all three resurrection perspectives identified here have make some sense when it comes to getting our heads around the confronting experience of death and what comes afterwards.

That resurrection can be embraced as a spiritual thing indicates it cannot be contained or explained in terms of our own finite understanding of reality. The physical realm in which we live just doesn't provide the reference points or the means for explaining such a thing.

Meanwhile, that resurrection can be explained in terms of metaphor where the reality of what Jesus represents and the truth of what Jesus proclaimed cannot be crushed by death is quite reassuring.

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And, thirdly, the idea that resurrection is ingrained in the potency and in the endurance of memory is extremely comforting and nurturing.

With these explanations in mind, we could move on with a sense of confidence that the issue has been addressed.

But as I read the gospel Easter narratives over the past few weeks, it seemed to me that the Gospel writers are making a special effort, indeed they are going out of their way to say resurrection is more than this. It is much, much more than this.

For you see, there is the report of the empty tomb that is particularly stressed in Mark's Gospel. Here the Gospel writer goes to significant lengths to communicate the message that the body is gone. The physical body of Jesus has been raised.

And then there is the report in John's Gospel where, on that first Easter morn, Mary meets Jesus walking in the garden. This is followed by that amazing encounter with Thomas where Jesus invites this doubting disciple to place his fingers in the wounds of Jesus' hands and in his side.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus appears to his disciples on the road to Emmaus and then, as we read today, Jesus appears to his friends, he speaks to them, he shows them his hands and his feet, he invites them to touch him and the eats a piece of broiled fish together with them.



Now, this all this seems to be far more that a spiritual apparition, a metaphor for life or, indeed, a memory from the past.

Friends, I believe the early Gospel writers are insistent that resurrection is physical, that resurrection is tangible, that resurrection is real. Resurrection here is not an apparition, it is not a metaphor, it is not simply a symbol and it is not just a beautiful, fond memory!

So where does this leave us?

There are a lot of things in the witness of the Christian tradition that are, in this modern era, simply hard to swallow - the creation of the world out of nothing, Sarah, the wife of Abraham giving birth at the age of 90 years, the parting of the Red Sea, the virgin birth, Jesus healing all those afflicted disease and disability, the raising of Lazarus, and the list goes on.

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Now, don't get me wrong. I am not advocating a literalist approach or a fundamentalist interpretation here. But what I am saying is that, as we approach the mysteries of our faith, as we are confronted with issue of resurrection, whatever you do, don't throw the baby out with bathwater. Don't try to rationalise, nail down or even fully explain what is going on here.

St Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor.15:20ff.), says the resurrection of Jesus is the "first fruits" of that which is to come. Here Paul refers to what actually awaits us beyond our own death. For, we too, will be raised in bodily form as a new creation brought about by God. Whew! Friends, how do we explain that?

A Harvard University professor in the US comments: "How does God put bodies – burned in fire or pulverised in war – back together again? If I had a lab how would I resurrect a body? The belief in resurrection is more radical. It's a supernatural event. It's a special act of grace or of kindness on God's part. For my part, I don't buy it. But I do, however, leave the door open a crack for radical acts of grace and kindness – and for humbling ourselves before all that we don't understand."

Friends, the point here is that we don't know. We will never know – until it happens. In the meantime we are left with the witness of those disciples and apostles. No matter how you choose to put it, on that day of resurrection Jesus was no apparition, he was no metaphor, he was no nostalgic memory. Rather, he was, even if it doesn't make sense, real. He was very real!

Indeed Jesus was so real that he spoke to his followers, Jesus was so real that he invited them to touch him. Jesus was so real that sat and ate with his friends!

The people of Campbelltown here in southwestern Sydney may have an annual celebration each year based on the appearance of Fred Fisher's ghost. But friends, I assure you, the annual celebration we observe each year that is Easter and the worship we participate on the first day of the week here in this church is based on much more than this.

For the risen Jesus is not an eerie apparition appearing in the darkness. The risen Jesus is not a metaphor or a symbol for a higher truth, the risen Jesus is not simply a memory from the past. The risen Lord is real. And the resurrection life that Jesus invites us into is just as real.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as you wrestle with this truth, take hold of it. Celebrate it, live it and give thanks to God for God's most amazing gift.

Resurrection is real. Resurrection is real for you and for me. Amen.

