

Sandy Baptist Church: Sunday 15 May 2022: 10.30am

Order of Service

Communion

John 21:1–14:

^{21:1} Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ ‘I’m going out to fish,’ Simon Peter told them, and they said, ‘We’ll go with you.’ So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, ‘Friends, haven’t you any fish?’

‘No,’ they answered.

⁶ He said, ‘Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.’ When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, ‘It is the Lord,’ he wrapped his outer garment round him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred metres. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish you have just caught.’ ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ None of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Transphysicality

All four Gospels record the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Mark's is the shortest account, and I think there's good reason to believe that the end of the original Gospel has somehow been lost. There are a number of alternative endings that, generally speaking, couldn't have been written by Mark himself. Bible scholars still debate all this, but from where we stand today, we don't learn anything much from Mark about what happened after Jesus' appearance to the women at the empty tomb.

Matthew doesn't give us much more – simply Jesus' appearance to the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and his last words about making disciples, words that we call 'The Great Commission'. Although, having said that, Matthew does add the intriguing detail that some of those present doubted – Matthew 28:17. Again, Bible scholars have played around with this, but I think the straightforward sense is that, given that resurrections just don't happen, and yet Jesus was plainly physically present, they just found it too much to comprehend. Wouldn't you and I be a bit like that – don't you think? Maybe we've got so used to the idea of Jesus rising from the dead, and added to that, the teaching from the rest of the New Testament about us being raised from the dead one day, that we find it difficult to put ourselves in the place of those early disciples for whom resurrection was a real prospect – that was the prevailing belief among the Jews, especially the Pharisees, but only for Israel, and only for everyone all at the same time. Jesus being raised from the dead as an individual was definitely not part of the normal expectation, and I think we can assume that all those early Christians, Paul included, would have struggled to make sense of it all. So, says Matthew, "some doubted".

And we see something like that in the other two Gospels too. Both Luke and John say much more about Jesus after his resurrection, and both accounts are full of fascinating and challenging details. In Luke, for example, we find the story of the two disciples walking out to Emmaus, and Jesus' encounter with them – how they didn't recognise this one with whom they had spent the past three years, and how it was only as he broke bread in their home that they recognised him – and then he vanished! Incidentally, I'm not of a sacramentalist frame of mind, but I do think that Luke is saying something very important for us, even today, as we break bread together. As we share communion together, do we discern, not only the body of his people with whom we share bread and wine, but also, in some supernatural way, a discernment of his presence with us among his people – his body? Just one of the fascinating questions that these passages at the ends of the Gospels throw up for us.

Luke and John tell different stories about Jesus' appearances, but both have things in common. I've already mentioned the fact that there was a sense of non-recognition and even disbelief – Thomas in particular in John 20, and the comment in chapter 21 about them not being quite sure whether it was Jesus or not – at least, that's how I read it. He was the same person, but somehow he was different - what someone has called 'transphysicality' – the same, but transformed into something better, if you like. What is also common to Luke and John is the sense that, although Jesus was very physical, he goes to some lengths to try to persuade the disciples that he wasn't a ghost – simply by inviting their touch, and sharing food with them, for example. But there are a number of incidental details that confirm his physicality, even though he was able to appear and disappear at will, and it's that aspect of it all that I find the most intriguing, I must admit. But think about that situation in Luke 24: in verse 30 it says, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them." Then he vanished. But they were left with broken pieces of bread. Can a ghost break a loaf and leave it in pieces? I find that kind of detail far more persuasive than some of the other perhaps more obvious 'proofs', so to speak, of his physicality.

I think I should say at this point that for those first disciples the concept of resurrection had to be physical. There is so much scepticism, even among Bible scholars today, about this. And there is a whole fashion for denying that the resurrected Jesus had a physical constitution. I'm not going to bore you with lots of the ideas that seem to have influenced the thinking of so many well-educated Christians, but I think the predominant theory is that the first-century Church somehow, because of their experience of the living Lord Jesus whom they encountered in their worship and miracle-working, and many other ways, they developed a sort of mythology of a physical resurrection that found its way into the Gospels, which admittedly were written many years after the events about which they relate. So, there was a sort of writing back into the Gospels a made-up explanation for how they had been able to experience conversion and the kinds of spiritual experiences they were having.

Some have suggested, although this idea isn't quite so common now, the idea of what has been called 'cognitive dissonance' – in other words, the early Christians had a profound religious experience that slowly grew into a way of speaking about bodily resurrection. If you want to delve more into all of this, I can't recommend too strongly Tom Wright's book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. It's very long, but well-worth the effort. But, in any case, as Tom Wright insists, everybody in the first century world understood the term 'resurrection' to mean bodily rising again after death. Not resuscitation or some sort of spooky apparition, but real physical restoration after real death of the same body that had died. Even those who didn't believe in resurrection understood the word in that

way. The fact that they denied resurrection was because they just didn't see how it could be possible. The Sadducees, for example whom we encounter in the Gospels trying to trick Jesus into making a mistake – you know the story about the woman who was married off to seven brothers in turn, and about whose wife she would be in the resurrection. It's in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, so it must have been important to the Gospel writers – and in Acts 23:8 too, where Paul deliberately plays off the Sadducees, who rejected the idea of resurrection, with the Pharisees who believed that one day all of Israel would be raised from the dead. The point is that, even those who denied resurrection understood the word to mean a physical coming back to life from death of the body that had died. That's the significance of the empty tomb on Easter morning. And that was true even of the pagan Greeks well before the time of Jesus. They didn't believe resurrection was possible, but that's the way they understood the word. And resurrection isn't possible, is it? That's what makes it a miracle. Even the infamous Bishop of Durham of a few years ago, David Jenkins, made that very point.

And, as we read through the New Testament, I think we have to be aware that if Jesus had not been raised bodily from the dead, whatever else happened to the first century Christians just couldn't be accounted for, especially the fact that they were prepared to die for believing it. We find that the fact, as they perceived it, of Jesus' bodily resurrection underpinned everything they experienced and wrote about.

But let's come back to John 21. It seems reasonably clear that John ended his original Gospel at chapter 20. I think the whole structure of the Gospel bears that out, so chapter 21 is a kind of postscript or epilogue. An idea that appeals to me is that some see a seven-day structure in John from the first chapter to chapter 19 – the old creation in six days plus a day of rest. So, in chapter 20, we begin the new creation with an eighth day. This is a new start, and Jesus represents what Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:20 refers to as “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”, and in verse 23, he says that we who belong to Christ – that's us folk – will also be made alive – “each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”

This is new creation stuff, and we are beginning to touch on a vast, vast topic of what we will be when we are raised from the dead; what heaven will be like, what happens between our death and resurrection; whether heaven will be as physical as our resurrection bodies; where it will be – on earth or somewhere out there in the wider universe – all sorts of questions which we cannot even begin to address here this morning, but a whole fascinating array of exploration of what the Bible teaches. I do think that much of this has often been avoided, mainly because the Church seems to have bought into what some writers call Christoplatonism or

platonic Christianity, in other words, the belief that resurrection and the new creation cannot be physical, but must have a spiritual consistency. That's not the way the New Testament writers conceived of it at all, and neither should we. But the Church generally speaking has lost out on so much of what should constitute our Christian hope because many just cannot believe in that kind of physical 'life after life after death', as Tom Wright puts it.

What I think John is doing in chapter 21 is giving us a taste of the wonder of the new creation – Creation Day 8, if you will – the overlap of the old creation and the new, which is where we find ourselves in our own time between the resurrection and the second coming of Jesus when he will finally arrive and set everything to rights. But, if chapter 21 was a deliberate afterthought by John, why did he add it on to an already complete Gospel? There are two possible main reasons, and they are, firstly, the rehabilitation of Peter, who denied Jesus, and, secondly, something about the longevity of John, the 'beloved disciple' and writer of the Gospel. If you read to any extent about these passages you will find that every word in my last sentence is challenged by someone or other, but that's where I stand, and I think the idea that John, the brother of James, who was martyred very early on, and was both the writer and was known as the 'beloved disciples', makes the best sense of what we find in the New Testament. But I want to leave aside those aspects of the chapter and in the remaining time have a look briefly at the verses we read together.

An, perhaps a bit controversially, I want to home in on something I have already hinted at, and that is that, although Jesus is portrayed as being the same person in the same body as before his crucifixion and resurrection, there was something strangely different about him in these post-resurrection stories. And I particularly want us to think about that because of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, where he quite clearly teaches that we shall have bodies like Jesus' body when we are raised from the dead. I have already referred to verse 23 of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul writes that those who belong to Christ will be "made alive", but in verse 35 he asks the question "With what kind of body will they come?", and he spends quite a few verses explaining that there will be differences between the bodies we now have and the bodies we will have then – but remember, in his mind, and therefore in ours, it is a physical, material body that we will be given when Jesus comes back. We haven't got time to read the whole passage, but I suggest that you do read it sometime, perhaps after lunch today before you drift off into your Sunday afternoon nap.

Just one comment, though: some have got stuck with the idea that Paul seems to be talking about a non-material existence, because he writes about 'spiritual' bodies, as though our resurrection bodies will consist of non-material spirit. Verse 44 in the NIV says, "it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body".

This might give the impression that Paul is contrasting our present bodies as physical with our resurrection non-physical or supernatural bodies – although that would be a misnomer because a body has to have substance. Indeed, that’s exactly how the Living Bible translates the words – ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’, respectively. But that’s not the way Paul uses the words which are translated ‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’ in the NIV and in many other versions.

Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, in chapter 2:13 and 14, for example, Paul uses these same words with respect to different kinds of people in the Corinthians church. The ‘natural’ people were those motivated by worldly things, and they were not open to the things of the world to come – fleshly or worldly Christians. The word he uses there is the Greek word from which we derive our word ‘soul’ or ‘mind’ or ‘psyche’, so we could translate it as ‘soulish’. In other words, Paul is contrasting those who are not ‘spiritual’ with those who are, and he uses the same word for ‘spiritual’ there as he does in chapter 15 to refer to the ‘spiritual’ body we shall receive at our resurrection. So, it’s nothing to do with non-material resurrection bodies – that couldn’t be true of living, very much material, people in the church, but with resurrection bodies which have been transformed and energised by the Spirit of God. And you find this to be true wherever Paul and other New Testament writers use these two words. In Jude 19, for example, the same words are used in the sentence, “These ... who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.” Paul believed that our resurrection bodies would be the same as Jesus’ resurrection body – solid, physical, but nonetheless transformed – *improved*, if you will.

How then will our ‘improved’ resurrection bodies be different from the bodies we have now? Verse 42 says that our bodies will be raised ‘imperishable’. Death has been defeated, and, like Jesus, we can never die again. He says too that whereas our bodies are ‘sown’ or ‘buried’ in dishonour, they will be raised in glory; those ‘sown’ in weakness will be raised in power; the natural or fleshly becoming glorified and completely in tune with God’s Spirit. And so, says Paul in verse 49, “just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.”

But then he adds to the problem by saying in verse 50,

I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

This, of course, has been taken by some to mean, despite whatever else he says, that Paul didn’t really believe in physical resurrection at all. However, what he is really doing is contrasting that which is perishable because it is corrupted by sin, with, on the other hand, that which is imperishable. He is saying that we

cannot enter into God's glory – heaven, if you like, as we are, but we have to undergo a transformation first. We remain physical beings, just like those who are alive when the Lord returns who also will be changed when he appears. As Paul says in Philippians 3:20-21,

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will *transform* our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

The only difference is that if we are still around when Jesus returns, we won't pass through death, but we will still be transformed – 1 Corinthians 15:52:

For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and *we* will be changed.

There are the dead, who will be raised and have bodies of glory – 'spiritual' bodies, if you will, and there are the living, the 'we' of the second part of that sentence, who will be changed in a moment, "in the twinkling of an eye". The Apostle John says the same thing – 1 John 3:2:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

We have strayed a bit from John 21, but I have become increasingly aware that many Christians today have lost their grip on that the Bible calls our 'hope'. That hasn't been helped by that Platonism that has infected the Church's understanding of heaven and the whole story of resurrection – Jesus' and ours. Some of us may sense that the physical world is in some sense inferior or even tainted, and that the spiritual or supernatural is what really matters. So, I want folks to know that what we hope for – our sure and certain hope, isn't just some ethereal strumming of imaginary harps on floating clouds, but that there is a solid reality to it all. Indeed, the Apostle John in the book of Revelation sees the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven from God to earth – Revelation 21:10, implying, I believe, that what we call heaven will be a joining of the heavenly with a renewed, perhaps recreated earth, and our surroundings will be solid and familiar to an extent, but renewed and perfect once again as in the first creation – not just very good, but very, very good. Nothing wrong with the material: God said it was 'very good', didn't he? Instead of us going to heaven when we die, heaven will come to us!

There are other odd things about John 21 if you think about it. Jesus had been raised from the dead, but the disciples – those named in the passage, at any rate, were at a loose end. “Let’s go fishing”, says Peter. But where was Jesus all this time? It seems that he could be wherever he wanted to be, and appear and disappear at will, but there he is on the shore with the barbecue well in progress. He wasn’t there when they set out in their boat the previous evening. It was now morning. But they weren’t sure it was Jesus, a bit like the way those two disciples in Luke 24 didn’t recognise him even at close quarters. And they hadn’t caught a single minnow all night. Surely that was Jesus preventing them from catching any fish, so when he sends them off to try again, they caught so many fish – 153 of them – “large fish”, it says. They could barely land the catch, although the net wasn’t damaged – Jesus again.

That’s another intriguing puzzle – 153 large fish. Why would they count them, and was there any significance in the number? I don’t think anyone has ever really solved that one, but it does seem to be significant in some way. It was recognised very early on, certainly by the time of Augustine, that 153 is the triangle based on the number 17, and many have juggled with the numbers and come up with all sorts of weird and wonderful suggestions. I do think the number is significant, but I haven’t a clue what its significance is.

The main points of the chapter are, as I said earlier, more about Peter’s rehabilitation and his role in the early Church, and about John who would have been writing this account quite close to the end of his earthly life, it is usually assumed, and how that related to the Lord’s second coming. But, as I said, I wanted to focus more on Jesus himself and get us thinking more biblically about our own future. As I say, I think many of us may have lost our grip on our hope, and we may need to refocus on the fact that we have been predestined to sonship, and that means we are destined to be inheritors of what Christ himself will inherit. Paul calls us co-heirs with him, and, just as Abraham was promised an earthly inheritance, so, I believe are we. But, unlike Abraham’s inheritance or lot, we shall share all that the Lord Jesus Christ chooses to share with us, and we shall reign with him throughout eternity, an eternity where there is nothing to defile or spoil. I love those words from the end of Revelation, words which describe the solid reality of God’s ultimate Kingdom, and I end with those words – Revelation 21:1-5:

21:1 Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God

himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

⁵He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’

Let us pray...

See what a morning (SF 2020)