

So we are on the final stages of our sermon series, “the life and ministry of Jesus”. We started at Christmas with the birth of Jesus, and have travelled through wise men, John the Baptist, Miracles and Disciples; we looked at why baptism, church and worship all matter, we joined the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and we watched Jesus die and rise again, after which he appeared to his disciples, and we are in this slightly strange 40 day period after Easter which we actually know very little about.

So in our last three Sundays of the series we bring the story to a conclusion. In a moment we are going to look at those last 40 days, what do we know about what happened and what that means for us today. Next week, we will be looking at the last day of Jesus’ life on earth as we celebrate Ascension, and then in two weeks, on Pentecost Sunday, we will be looking at the gift he left us – the Holy Spirit.

So what do we know about what happened after Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to his disciples, including Thomas who needed proof as he missed the first meeting?

Well the best place to look is the four gospels. You may remember that in our bibles Mark’s gospel has two different endings – the longer of which is highly unlikely to have been written by Mark, so we will ignore that. And in a nut shell, Mark tells us nothing about what happened.

Now Mark’s gospel is one of the key sources for Matthew and Luke to write their gospels, so what they say about the 40 days, as Mark told us nothing, is going to be their own story. Well Luke includes two things, which are kind of linked – the walk to Emmaus, which I will come back to in a minute, and then, after Jesus had appeared to the disciples Luke tells us this:

‘ Jesus said to the disciples, “When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And he said, “Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: ‘There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.’ You are witnesses of all these things.

“And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven.” ‘

Then Luke tells us that Jesus and the disciples went off to Bethany, and he ascended into heaven – but more of that next week.

But what that closing speech is saying to his disciples is three things. First, that Jesus, the Messiah’s very life was foretold in the old testament scriptures, including how we would suffer and die and rise again, even to the accuracy of he would rise again on the 3rd day – and so that is why Jesus had to live the life that he did. And second, after those three years of the disciples frequently misunderstanding what Jesus was saying to them, Jesus, at this point, enabled them to understand all those things for themselves. What a very practical thing for Jesus to do - after all his disciples were going to be taking the message of God forward as he would no longer be there, and so they had to understand the whole story. And third, Jesus is pointing out to his disciples that whilst the spreading of the message starts in Jerusalem, it is for all nations.

And that is what Peter was showing he had understood in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, when he talked about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, even being poured out on the Gentiles.

Matthew’s ending is very different. Again two stories; first a fascinating little story about, well, corruption.

‘As the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and told the leading priests what had happened. A meeting with the elders was called, and they decided to give the soldiers a large bribe. They told the soldiers, “You must say, ‘Jesus’ disciples came during the night while we were sleeping, and they stole his body.’ If the governor hears about it, we’ll stand up for you so you won’t get in trouble.” So the guards accepted the bribe and said what they were told to say. Their story spread widely among the Jews, and they still tell it today.’

I think that’s fascinating. Deep routed corruption. It is almost as if the chief priests believed what had happened but they were simply too afraid that if what happened became known, their positions would rapidly become very weak indeed.

And Matthew making clear to his readers at the end that those lies were still being told when he wrote his gospel.

And Matthew finishes his story with what we now call, ‘the great commission’.

‘Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”

This is Matthew’s version of Jesus’ closing statement to the disciples, perhaps he just remembers it slightly differently to Luke, after all these gospels were written 20, 30 years or so after the death of Jesus. But what Matthew remembers is Jesus saying go and tell everyone what you have seen, and what you understand. And of course that still applies to us today. That is what Jesus wants us to do.

Which brings us to John, and his telling of the meeting between Jesus and Peter. “Simon”, said Jesus. Despite calling Simon, Peter very early on, here Jesus still called him Simon.

Why, is hard to understand, but perhaps, at the end of the story, Jesus is simply alluding to the fact that when he called Simon to be a disciple he referred to him as Simon, Son of John, or it could be translated as Simon of John – perhaps reminding him that he was originally a disciple of John the Baptist? Who knows, but it is good to be reminded from time to time that there are many things about the bible, and the Christian faith, that we can’t understand fully – and that doesn’t matter. So,

‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ And even though Simon Peter emphatically answered Yes, Jesus asked him the same question three times – surely a reminder to Simon Peter that he had denied knowing Jesus, three times. And this was Jesus saying to Simon Peter – you’re in charge now. Go and form my church. Go and tell the people all about me. It’s over to you now.

And that is what we know. That’s not very much really is it. So what might have happened and why did he stay around for 40 days? Well first and foremost to show as many people as possible that he really was alive. He showed people his wounds to prove that he had been killed.

He ate food to show he was alive. And he continues to teach those people who he was leaving behind to continue his work. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to over 500 people. And why? Because Jesus’ last act on earth was to prove that it all came down to love.

That’s what our gospel reading is telling us. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus’ entire ministry was all about teaching us that God loves each and every one of us. Not collectively, but individually. And that gospel reading also tells us that God has a role for each of us – and for those roles, he chose us – not collectively, but individually.

And one of the last ways he showed us all that was in the story that I said I would come back to – the walk to Emmaus.

This took place just after Jesus had risen from the dead, and before many people knew that he had. Two of his followers were walking to a place called Emmaus. Who were they – one was called Cleopas, the other we don't even have a name. We know nothing about these two people.

But they were walking, I assume to escape the horrors that had taken place in Jerusalem as they feared for their lives after their leader had been killed, and they were talking about what had happened, not understanding, and Jesus joined them.

For some reason these two people didn't recognise Jesus, but that didn't matter to Jesus. He just wanted to love these guys, to support them, to walk alongside them both physically and spiritually, he explained to them why what had happened, had happened, and he explained this to them by linking what happened to him to the old testament scriptures in the same way that he did when he talked to his disciples. And when they invited Jesus to stay with them he came.

'As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared!

They said to each other, "Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?" '

Jesus wants to walk with each and every one of us today on our journeys.

No we can't walk down the road with him physically beside us, but we can engage with him through our prayer, through our bibles, through our worship, through our communion. And that is what Astrid,(with her baptism this morning at Shepreth) will be starting to do as she starts her journey as part of God's family.

That is quite a journey for us all – quite a journey for Jesus too. We may not know that much about those last 40 days, but, as in the rest of the gospel stories, what we know is really quite wonderful.

Amen