

There are some Sundays when the only way you can start a sermon is by saying, "This is the story so far". Now just in case you are worried, that doesn't mean to say that I am going to recap the whole of St Matthew's gospel as last week we got pretty close to the end of the gospel that we have been following since Christmas. No, I am just picking up on that first Easter Sunday story where we left the story with Jesus having been raised back to life, the women who had gone to the tomb to care for his body having met the risen Jesus, and Jesus telling the disciples, via the women, to go to Galilee and wait for him there.

And today we take up the story as told to us by John, and also by Luke in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. As we shall see we have the current, the future, and the past all covered in our readings today. But before we look at today, let's not move away from that first Easter Sunday and the resurrection too quickly. There are times when we can become a bit blasé about what has happened. We are so familiar with the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus that Easter becomes just another day, another story in the Christian year.

So before moving on I want to warn us against that. We must never forget the shock surrounding what happened. Those disciples who had ministered alongside Jesus for 3 years had had the bottom fall out of their lives. They had seen Jesus killed, cruelly. They were scared stiff and they were hiding. And they receive the news that actually he wasn't dead. Can you imagine a bigger shock.

And the other thing we must not lose is the wonder surrounding what happened. The resurrection of Jesus was the most amazing, most wonderful, event that had ever happened and, I would suggest, until the second coming of Jesus, ever will happen in this world. And we must not be afraid to keep on going on about it – because this one event is the salvation of the world – it is how we have hope for the future – it is how we have a future at all. It is truly amazing so never forget the shock, and the wonder, of that day.

But now, we need to look at what happened next, and see how we learn from what happened next. So Jesus meets up with his disciples, as organised, and greets them – Peace be with you. This was the normal everyday eastern greeting, and it means far more than, 'may you be saved from your troubles'. It means, 'May God give you every good thing.' And he says it twice. It is as if Jesus is leading up to something big – and he certainly was. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

You know there is a world of difference between something being achieved, and something being implemented. A composer can write the most amazing work of music, but when he writes it is just a series of dots and lines and symbols and some words on paper. He has achieved his aim of creating a piece of music. But it is not until a performer, or a set of performers takes that sheet music and plays it, is that work implemented – and the true beauty, or perhaps in some case not so beautiful, but let's ignore that option, the true beauty of the work is heard and enjoyed by others.

Jesus' mission, when God put him on this earth, was to Israel – and it reached its climax in his death and resurrection, and so that mission has been achieved. But what happens next? "As the Father has sent me so I am sending you." That mission of Jesus' is now to be implemented by his disciples. They are implementing what Jesus has achieved. But the difference, what has

changed, is that the disciples mission is not to the people of Israel – it is to the whole world. They were sent out to spread the message of what Jesus had done to anyone who would listen.

Quite a task really for these 11 men, but, of course, they are not alone. 'And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."' But that's now how the Holy Spirit arrived – that was in a closed room and there was wind and fire. That is what we shall hear at Pentecost. Well, two things. First of all that is Luke's version, and as we know the precise description of these events varies depending on who is writing a gospel (taking the Acts of the Apostles as Luke's gospel part 2) and who their audience is, but second, in both Hebrew and Greek – the language spoken in Israel and the language the New Testament was written in, the word for wind, breath, and Spirit, its the same word. So, in a nutshell don't worry about the text, but be aware that here Jesus is ensuring that his disciples, who he is giving a very hard job to, are getting the help they need. And how difficult is that job? Well, consider the next verse.

'If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive their sins, they are not forgiven.' Wow!

That is pressure is it not. Is Jesus really saying to his disciples that they have the authority to forgive sins? Surely not – only God has the power to forgive sins. And the point here is that we should not take the words of Jesus literally. Jesus did not have the authority to forgive sins – his Father gave him the authority to pass on his forgiveness to other people. And that is what is being given to his disciples, in the same way that when I was ordained I was given the authority to pass on God's forgiveness of people's sins to them. When I give an absolution in our services I am not forgiving sins – I am passing on God's forgiveness. But that authority is such a huge responsibility – we, as Jesus' disciples are charged with ensuring that people know that their sins can be forgiven – if they commit themselves to following Jesus, and actually only if they commit themselves to following Jesus. And that can be a really hard message to pass on to people – it was then and it still is today.

Then the story moves to Thomas – who was missing on the night of that first Easter day but is back with the disciples a week later. I love Thomas. He is so honest. He says what he thinks, and he is brave about it. The first time we really hear about Thomas was when Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was ill. Jesus and his disciples had been in Judea and had almost been stoned to death but just escaped. In order to help Lazarus they would have to go back to Judea and his disciples rather cautioned against except for Thomas who basically said, let's risk it and if we die we die. Quite amazing courage and very blunt.

Then when Jesus was telling the disciples in John 13 that he was going to die, and in chapter 14 reassured them by saying that when he died he would prepare a place in his Father's house for them, and that they would know the way to where he was going, it was Thomas who piped up and said, 'sorry we don't know where you are going so how can we know the way?' which led to Jesus saying I am the way the truth and the life. And now, Thomas is not going to accept this amazing, wonderful resurrection without proof. Someone known today as Doubting Thomas should really be called, 'Questioning Thomas' – and there is nothing wrong with asking questions. But it is still the job of those who followed Jesus to convince people of the truth of Jesus, without seeing, without that proof.

The ending of John's gospel is quite unusual. The gospel has 21 chapters, but the end of chapter 20 appears to be a clear ending:

'Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' Sound to me like the end.

– but then there is more. We have John's version of the miraculous catch of fish and then Jesus putting Peter in charge of his church – but then another ending verse.

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Some scholars suggest that chapter 21 was a bit of an afterthought – perhaps a later edit, but, from what I can gather, all the scripts of John's gospel that were found contained that last chapter, so that doesn't make sense. So this is all a mystery – but the point of me talking about this is that the end of the Thomas story rounds off John's gospel in another way.

Thomas said to him (that is Jesus), "My Lord and my God." This is the only time in John's gospel that Jesus is referred to as God – apart from right at the beginning of John's gospel when we are told that Jesus was God.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The gospel of John started by saying that Jesus would come into the world in human form (the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us) and our chapter today, chapter 20 completes the circle. Here we are told that Jesus has achieved what he was came to do, and the rest, the implementation, is up to us, with the Holy Spirit's help. And who was the person that recognised that circle had been completed – our friend, supposedly doubting, Thomas. There is hope for all of us.

Talking of hope for all of us, if there is one disciple who appears to get into trouble with Jesus more than any other, particularly climaxing with denying him three times, it is good old Peter.

And our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning is the middle section of what I always like to consider to be the greatest sermon ever preached – after all at the end of it 3,000 people answered Peter's altar call to come and give their lives to Jesus.

It is such a great sermon that in setting the lectionary readings, we have it divided into three parts – we heard part 1 last week, and you will probably hear part 3 next week. But in part 2 Peter quotes from an old testament prophet – maybe one of the greatest Old Testament prophets, King David. Peter first quoted from what we now know as Psalm 16 and then explained it liked this:

'I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the

resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.'

Which all rather completes the journey we have been on since Christmas. Here we have David prophesying about what would happen to Jesus, born of the house of David, referred to in a sermon preached after Jesus had been crucified and resurrected, by Peter. This was Peter doing what Jesus had commissioned Peter, and his fellow disciples to do, with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Which is what we have been working towards for the last three and a bit months. But perhaps we should leave the last word to Matthew in the end of his gospel which we have been following – in his own version of what John has shared with us and we have looked at today.

'Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'"

Next week in Shepreth Ian Friars will, I suspect, be sharing with you his thoughts on what I always like to see as the beginning of life after the resurrection as he looks at the story, 'On the road to Emmaus'. And after that, who knows where this amazing story will take us next. Amen