

Reflection on Acts 3. 12-19, Luke 24. 36b-48

Julie Tate

18th April 2021

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

On Good Friday something of a Twitter storm broke out in church circles. This usually occurs when a provocative tweet is posted and people react. In this case, it was the president of the Humanist Society, Professor Alice Roberts, who tweeted "Just a little reminder today. Dead people don't come back to life."

In many ways, it seemed a somewhat pointless tweet – for those who agreed already knew exactly what they thought and it would take much more to seriously challenge the faith of believers. However, people of faith did object to her insensitivity in stating such a thing on this most holy of days for Christians. There were many brilliant replies- some carefully explaining that resurrection is not the same as resuscitation, while others schooled her in the difference between faith and certainty.

The Reverend Richard Coles replied, 'When Christians like me proclaim the resurrection it is not to refute biological truth. It is a faith in the power of God, which is measureless.'

During Lent, a group of us have been studying the book, *Living His Story*, by Hannah Steele. She reminds us that "to bear witness to the good news is to proclaim loud and clear that Jesus is alive, that death has been defeated and that our deepest fear has been met with resurrection and new life." And this good news is about an event that is actually claimed to have happened in history.

And yet and yet if you don't have serious doubts about the Easter story, you're not really paying attention.

Seriously. Just read the story. Actually, all of the stories. For, while the four gospels have variations in their accounts they are absolutely consistent on one thing: no one believes the good news of Jesus' resurrection when they first hear it. Not one. And that includes Jesus' own disciples, the ones who were closest to him and spent the most time with him. In fact, that level of disbelief starts with the disciples.

In earlier verses Luke tells us that the disciples dismissed the testimony of the women as an "idle tale." The Greek word Luke employs – *leros* – is the root of our word *delirious*. So the disciples are saying that the women are out of their minds. Really!?

But perhaps it was to be expected – after all one who had died actually being raised upsets the natural order and causes a loss of confidence in everything they thought they could count on.

So no wonder the disciples doubt the women. Except it's not just their testimony, they doubt; it's even Jesus. That's what's so astounding. Peter ran to the tomb and confirmed it was empty, two disciples on the road to Emmaus returned to tell their tale of encountering Jesus, and now...wait for

it ... now Jesus appears among them and invites them to touch him to dispel any doubts they may have. He even eats a fish for goodness sake!

And yet then Luke writes, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering...”

So even after all this they *still* don't believe. What chance do we have of believing something so astounding over 2000 years later? Of course, if this had happened today it might have been easier – because somebody would have been filming it on their phone and there would have been no room for doubt. Or would there -in these days of false news – who knows?

But, of course, if the resurrection could be proved one hundred percent beyond all doubt then it would be fact not faith and worthless. As Stephen Cottrell explains in his recent book *Dear England* ‘God could give an overwhelmingly irrefutable show of divine power and we would be left with no choice but to conclude: yes, there is a God. We would have to ‘believe’. But it would be foolish –and it wouldn't be freely given love’

It really is important to remember that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt, in fact, is probably a necessary ingredient to faith. Faith, by definition, is trust *in spite of* a lack of thorough evidence. Faith is not knowledge. It is *acting as if* something is 100% true even when you have no absolute proof that it is.

We are a community of people who have all kinds of questions and doubts but still find joy and wonder in this message of good news about new life. It's okay to doubt, in fact it's probably a requirement of faith. In the light of all the death, trauma and tragedy we face, especially recently, if we don't have at least some difficulty believing the promise that God not only raised one person, Jesus, from the dead, but also promises new life, forgiveness and grace to all, then we probably are not paying attention.

Yet when we do pay attention we also find something else – not proof, not scientific fact, but rather evidence in the form of the witness of those very same disciples who expressed so much doubt and bewilderment when they first encountered the risen Jesus.

When I was teaching we had a lesson for year 8 where 13 year olds proved to be wonderful detectives and theologians as they considered the alternative claims to the resurrection One by one, the various theories were built up and dismantled. There was space to come up with a theory of their own and usually at least one bright spark would write ‘the whole thing was made up’. And ultimately that's what it usually comes down to - either the claim of the resurrection is false or it is amazingly true, depending what we believe about the power and goodness of God and the truth of the Bible.

But there is also something else which is incredibly persuasive.

Just look at what happened to those poor, bewildered disciples as they gradually began to accept as truth something that at first seemed utterly unbelievable. They became the witnesses Jesus intended them to be, especially when they were emboldened by the Holy Spirit. They convinced many others of the truth of what they had seen and the Church was born. Without their witness we would not be here as a church today. And, of course, many of them died for their belief and as one of my students once said ‘Why would you die for something you know to be a lie?’ The evidence for their martyrdom is not just found in the Bible but also in other sources such as the Roman historians Tacitus and Josephus.

These beliefs about the resurrection are so familiar to us we often don't really think about them and so often don't act as if they are true. But if it's true that God raised Jesus from the dead... If it's true that God promises to renew the whole creation and grant us new life... If it's true that nothing – nothing we've done or has been done to us – can separate us from the love of God... If *any* of this – let alone *all* of this – is true, then how might we live our lives differently? How might this faith – not knowledge, but trusting, courageous faith – change how we look at our current lives and our future?

And if it takes a little time to let all this sink in, to come to active trust and faith that these promises are true, well, then let's keep in mind that we're in good company. Jesus' first disciples struggled with all of this as well.

But we are an Easter people – Jesus is risen – he is risen indeed Alleluia!