

**St. Margaret's Uniting Church
Mooroolbark**

**Sunday 15th April, 2018
3rd Sunday of Easter**

Welcome

All are invited to share morning tea following the service

WE GATHER TO WORSHIP GOD:

GREETING & INTRODUCTION

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all ... **and also with you.**

WE SING 'I danced in the morning' (TIS 242)

CALL TO WORSHIP

OPENING PRAYER

WE LISTEN TO GOD'S WORD:

SHARING THE EARLY WORD

God's Dream, by Desmond Tutu

WE SING 'I am the church' (TIS 467)

EPISTLE READING 1 John 3:1-7

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

GOSPEL READING Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.'

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING (*Thom Schuman*)

- ... God of Easter: touch us with your grace.
- ... Risen Christ: **touch us with your compassion.**
- ... Spirit of Hope: **touch us with your peace.**

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

- ... Lord have mercy **Lord have mercy**
- ... Christ have mercy **Christ have mercy**
- ... Lord have mercy **Lord have mercy**

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

- ... we are loved and forgiven, **thanks be to God, Amen.**

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

Not everybody wants to be a witness.

As we hear of escalating strikes in Syria, we are reminded of all who have fought in wars. And as we are close to another ANZAC day, we are reminded of returned veterans who would rather forget and nations compelled not to forget the cost of war.

There are of course good reasons to be a witness. We witness new births, weddings, or a 90th birthday as I did yesterday. But sometimes being a witness is very confusing.

In the gospel passage we've just heard Jesus say to the disciples, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). There have been many confusing events in their recent history. What are the things that they witness to?

There are a lot of things, but it's all a bit messy. Peter runs to a tomb to find it empty. But empty tombs don't really tell us that much. Then disciples walking to Emmaus are met by a stranger they don't recognise until bread is broken before them. And then they witness a vanishing Jesus. But they run back to tell the others of what they have seen and heard. And now, as Jesus reveals himself to the room full of disciples and offers them peace, they think they witness a ghost.

And so the text goes through the ancient test, a checklist of sorts, to prove that Jesus was not the ghost they feared:

- Does he have extremities, hands and feet, bones and the like?
 - Check
- Are his feet on the ground? No floating?
 - Check
- Does he have teeth?
 - Check
- Can he eat food?
 - Good, he's eating the fish, check

It must have been hard for them all. They've been traumatised not only by death but by their response to it. They have betrayed, denied, run away, hidden, and not been able to believe. Perhaps a ghostly checklist is all they are capable of.

But Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48).

They ARE witnesses. Not will be. Not please be. Not consider it if you aren't busy fishing. You ARE witnesses of these things.

If I were Jesus, I'd want the disciples to be better than witness to their own fears of a ghost, unable to receive his peace for what it is. But it seems that this takes time. And it takes time to piece together ghostly fragments and get to the place where they embody what Jesus seeks them to be.

It is generally believed that if the gospel of Luke is part 1 of this story, then the book of Acts is it's sequel. It is the witness to disciples who are living post-resurrection and piecing together all the ghostly bits of witness and stepping into the space where they find Jesus' peace and the Spirit's power and become witnesses to 'these things'. In the third chapter of Acts, the disciple Peter speaks boldly in Solomon's Portico

where he speaks of Jesus as being the author of life, who was crucified and whom God raised from the dead. "To this we are witnesses."

Peter who witnessed an empty tomb on Easter Day has come a long way. But it is still a confusing and incoherent journey, despite the boldness of Peter's proclamation. But there is a sense that seeing an empty tomb, and struggling to receive peace when you fear something else, changes everything. For once we have seen, once we have heard, we can no longer be blind or deaf to what God does.

I watched a documentary this week on Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. What he had witnessed and heard in his life drove him on a path 'towards the promised land'. The night before he was killed he spoke of seeing it, being close to it, believing that the promised land represented by the Civil Rights movement would indeed be reached. He spoke of being on the mountaintop, with a view into what was next. But he also spoke prophetically, sensing that his life was about to end.

And yet he was compelled to continue.

Driven by his understanding of the story of Jesus, driven by his faith, driven by resurrection hope, driven by injustice towards Black Americans, Rev. King could not be silenced. It was as though being a witness is not a voluntary thing. He reminds us vividly of that, as does the disciple Peter in the book of Acts.

But I wonder what was so compelling in what they had witnessed? What makes sense of the resurrection in our lives, that we might find ourselves witness to what God does?

As I think about this and the challenge of preaching about resurrection, I find myself clutching ghostly fragments in my own life of faith. There are moments, there are fragments - that compel me to witness, compel me to tell the story of Jesus, and make me believe beyond my disbelief. But in many ways they are like those witnessed by the disciples after the resurrection. For how can we speak about mystery? How can we speak of faith and being moved when language does not go deep enough?

How can we speak of what we have seen and heard when others have been there and seen and heard nothing?

An Easter Dawn, on a beach. I was perhaps 18. We shared communion, and as I ate and drank it was as though I knew for the first time. Yet even as I speak about it, it is as fleeting and ghostly as any other mountain-top moment.

There are of course others. But like them memory and lack of language rob me of finding witness to all that God has done in my life.

So what do we make of our fragile witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

The other passage from the Scriptures we heard this morning was from 1 John 3. There we hear more of the struggle to truly know, and perhaps a reminder that all of us are a work in progress – on a journey of faith, not having arrived in the promised land: Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

When Jesus tells the disciples they ARE witnesses, they are not compelling ones. I think it is a little comforting that we are like them. The fact that we are witnesses doesn't depend on how ready we are to witness. It doesn't depend on how skilled or articulate or courageous we are.

There is something that strikes me about this scene where Jesus breaks in to those struggling to believe, where they fear a ghost and yet receive peace instead. Is that what resurrection is? A place, many places, many times and places where peace comes to speak against fear?

When Jesus offers the disciples peace, it is not just an easy greeting. It isn't the thing you say when you arrive unexpectedly. It isn't the thing that paints over the cracks of all the trauma of death and denial. It is something far deeper.

Peace (shalom) is not an absence of distress and conflict but about wholeness, integration and well-being. Jesus' words have power. They are words that restore, bring healing, and perhaps most importantly, bring forgiveness. "Peace be with you" are resurrection's words. They join the disciples in the story of the resurrection. For all who have denied; for all who have betrayed; for all who have run away; for all who don't understand; for all who have failed; for all who live in fear – Jesus comes with the words of redemption, the words that invite us to begin again, words to lift us up, words of hope.

While I struggle with a witness of ghostly fragments, I recall moments where I have known a deep peace that passes all understanding. I've felt this peace at the most traumatic of times, like the death of a loved one. I've felt this peace at times when life seems to be shattered and I've not known the next step to take.

"Peace be with you."

The resurrection is also about being known and finding the place to belong again. "Peace be with you" are words of recognition. They are words of invitation into the life and company of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are words of invitation into the company of followers, who like you struggle to witness to ghostly fragments of divine insight. And yet at the table, when bread is broken, we become people of the resurrection.

The resurrection is proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in the name of Christ to all nations. It is new life and a lifting up all who struggle to find their way in a broken and alienating world.

Author, Margaret Silf, speaks of her hope from the confusion of events that the disciples are witness to:

When I reflect on the events that followed Jesus' crucifixion and burial, I notice certain patterns that give me real hope that resurrection is a here-and-now reality, and not just a remote, supernatural event, or a sequence of sentences in a creed. I see, for example:

- *That the resurrected Lord isn't easily recognised, and often comes in the guise of a stranger*
- *That he retains signs of his wounding and suffering, and continues to be marked by his experience*
- *That he comes into situations of despair, disappointment and doubt*
- *That he comes unobtrusively, never forcing himself upon us, but letting us discover him for ourselves*
- *That in his presence just a small shift of perspective can make a huge difference to our vision*
- *That he brings empowerment and commissions us to move on*
- *That he can't be clung to*
- *And that, above all, wherever he appears, he makes a difference.*

Reflecting on these facts gives me enormous hope.

- *In spite of my failures to recognise him, he will still break through my blindness*
- *The brokenness in me, that I felt to be such a barrier between us, might be the very place where I find him most readily.*

(Margaret Silf, Wayfaring, A gospel journey into life, pp 171-2)

Friends, however much we stumble or struggle to find our voice in witness, we are invited into resurrection's life. It begins with simple but profound words that challenge our fears and invite us through redemption into life and hope. These are Jesus' words for you.

"Peace be with you."

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD:

WE SING 'Loving Spirit, loving Spirit' (TIS 417)

OFFERING

PRAYER

Loving God -

**who both disturbed and comforted the disciples
with glimpses of the risen Jesus:
give us an awareness of his presence with us,
that we may be sustained,
to journey through both the dark
and joyous experiences of life,
and strengthened to serve you in his name. Amen.**

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.**

SHARING FROM THE CHILDREN

WE SING 'Lord, the light of your love is shining' (*TIS 675*)

SENDING FORTH OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD:

BLESSING and SENDING OUT

SENDING OUT SONG 'Send by the Lord am I' (*ATOK 412*)