

EASTER 3B 18-04-2021 The Reverend Lorna Green

Acts 3. 12-20; Ps 4; 1 John 2.15-17; 3.1-6; Luke 24. 36b-48

While they were talking about this, 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.

Movies and TV series about zombies are extremely popular and have been for years. Apparently the first ever film featuring zombies was made in 1932! There are plenty to choose from today: just check out Netflix.

I feel uncomfortable with the whole zombie idea; it seems to me that it gives producers an excuse to film horrible violence being inflicted on people, because zombies are meant to be other than human. They are 'un-dead', and all they want to do is eat living people, so they are evil; and that justifies chopping the heads off creatures that LOOK like people, but we are meant to believe they are not.

In voodoo, which is a kind of folk-religion, a zombie is a corpse that has been brought back to life by some kind of supernatural power. Most primitive and not-so-primitive belief systems include the fear of ghosts or other spooky things that look human but aren't.

When Jesus appeared to his followers after they had either seen him die or been told about it, they were understandably scared. Luke tells us they were startled and terrified when he appeared on the evening of what we think of as the day of Resurrection- the first Easter Day.

Of course they were frightened: people who had been executed tended to stay dead! They'd probably all heard stories of ghosts and bogey-men, and evil spirits were taken very seriously in those times. Who was this person- or more to the point, WHAT was he?

Jesus assured them that he wasn't a ghost or any such thing and asked them to look at him and touch him. He showed them his scars; his resurrection body still showed the wounds inflicted by the nails.

Then Jesus told his friends that he was hungry and asked if they had anything to eat. They rustled up some cooked fish and watched him eat it.

The writer of this gospel wants us to know that Jesus is real, he has a proper body, a scarred body, a HUMAN body, that feels hunger and thirst- just like us.

In the years that followed there were many who cast doubt on the resurrection or claimed that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, or that he wasn't really human in the first place; it took the early church a long time to thrash out what could truly be said about him, and that is why the Creeds were developed. It was important for this gospel writer to make sure he wrote about the risen Jesus in a way that could not be misunderstood. Luke wanted his readers to know that Jesus was not a spirit or a ghost, or even a zombie- but a flesh and blood human being.

We may wonder why Jesus still carried the scars of his horrible death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who was executed by the Nazis at the end of the second world war, wrote the words 'Only a suffering God can help.'

One writer tells the story of going into a Christian bookshop, looking for something to comfort her during a time of fear and sadness. When the shop assistant asked how she could help, the writer burst into tears. The assistant went and rummaged around in a box and came back with a tiny crucifix on a chain. "Wear this," she said. "Only a suffering God can help."

The great mystery of Easter is that we have a God who suffered and died out of love for us; a God who knows what it is to suffer, to feel pain and despair, grief, and rejection. Only a suffering God can help us in our suffering.

The disciples who were there that evening, who saw the scars and watched Jesus eat dinner, lost their fear and listened as he taught them.

He showed them that all the prophets and everything they knew from the Hebrew scriptures was pointing towards him.

We who call ourselves Christians, children of God, need to remember where our faith comes from. The Jews were the first to know God- the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We read their scriptures over the shoulder of Jesus, as it were; he and all his disciples and the earliest followers were Jewish people, steeped in the Hebrew faith.

Peter preached to the Israelites when they were astonished at his ability to heal a crippled beggar, and he spoke from a deeply Jewish perspective to a Jewish audience. He told them that they had rejected Jesus and killed him and needed to repent and turn to God- which thousands of them did, we are told in the book of Acts.

Sadly, Bible passages like this have been used to vilify and persecute Jewish people over the centuries, blaming them for crucifying Christ. When we think of the Holocaust and other atrocities committed against Jews, we know a justification given was that they were somehow less than human: a race so tainted that they should not be allowed to live.

I am reminded of the zombie story again: that it is necessary and good to murder them because although they might look like people, they are not.

Our Jewish sisters and brothers are truly members of the family of God; may they never be treated as anything else.

When Jesus finished explaining to the disciples how he was the one spoken of in the scriptures, he told them that they were to tell the Good News to everyone- beginning in Jerusalem. Then he said. "You are witnesses of these things."

He didn't say 'you WILL be witnesses', or 'would you LIKE to be witnesses?', or 'perhaps when you've done a bit more study you might consider being witnesses'; he said you ARE witnesses.

We are witnesses; we did not see the resurrected Jesus when he walked the earth and ate fish with his wounded hands, but we meet him in the bread and the wine as we gather for worship. Let's not keep this good news to ourselves.

The Lord be with you.