

## Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 18 April 2021

11.00am Rev Peter Cornick

### "Jesus Appears to his Disciples. And to us?"

Based on Luke 24:36b-48

#### A community of disciples

The chance to drop in on different churches, or experience different styles of worship during a sabbatical might seem appealing. On past sabbaticals, I've found it, interesting for a few weeks, but then, that feeling of rootlessness rises in me. Where do I belong? Who are my community? Perhaps I am just not very good at being nomadic. Or perhaps worshipping God is highly connected to a community with whom one has a relationship. Where there has been shared experience of working out faith together. The danger is, I know, that the church becomes a club of friends – at worst a clique. But if one has travelled together – say through a pandemic – and as a community, has worked out how to meet with God despite the challenges, the offering to God of worship is – well, communal. Jeremiah conveys this sense of God's involvement with the people of Israel:

<sup>33</sup> this is the covenant that I will make with the *house of Israel* after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within *them*, and I will write it on *their* hearts; and I will be *their* God, and they shall be *my people*. (Jeremiah 31:33)

So, extract yourself for three months from your community, and visit a number of churches – yes they're Christian, yes one could argue, they are still your community – but worship seems to feel disconnected. Now, doing all this on YouTube, pushes that disconnection further. I see names and greetings in the live 'chat' but I don't know the people. It felt more like watching TV. Remote. I have to say, being together on Zoom, is the closest I've seen to – well, being together.

So, my reflection on trying to worship in the last three months, admittedly in the strangest of environments, is that being extracted from one's community, makes a difference.

Who does Jesus appear to –

<sup>37</sup> *They* were startled and terrified, and thought that *they* were seeing a ghost.

<sup>45</sup> Then he opened *their* minds to understand the scriptures.

<sup>48</sup> *You* are witnesses of these things.

Jesus appears to the disciples. On the whole, he appears to groups – the community. Yes, he appears to Mary – alone – in Mark and John. Her first reaction, in both of those gospels, was to run and tell the other disciples. 'I have seen the Lord.' She tells her community.

The disciples had been talking about the appearance of Jesus on the Emmaus road – to a group of disciples you note who had been sharing their sadness.

<sup>36</sup>While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among *them* and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’

Jesus comes, and appears to the disciples – to the community with whom he travelled around Galilee teaching the kingdom of God; to the community who travelled to Jerusalem with him, and witnessed the horrors of Good Friday. Now, this community have something else to witness. His resurrection presence with them. He has appeared within *their* community.

In the midst of their isolation and terror, Jesus appears to his disciples. And I would suggest, that it is precisely in the midst of over a year of challenge, loss, bewilderment, deprivation from the sacraments, and an anxiety for the future, that Jesus appears to us.

### **A resurrection community.**

Yesterday, was the London Methodist Synod. A group of about 200 people representing the various Methodist churches around London. Usually, we meet at Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, but yesterday, on Zoom. A community if you like, who began the meeting in worship – travelling together, as the people of God. But communities do not always agree. If you’re not sure about that, join church council this afternoon. I guarantee, not everyone will agree! But as I said earlier, I will be celebrating human interaction and conversation!

Synod debated the report on human relationships – the headline of which is whether same sex marriage may take place in Methodist churches. The proposals in front of us made provision for such marriage to take place, whilst preserving the right of churches or ministers who wished not to conduct such marriages. The proposals offered a two-track theology for marriage: that marriage is both between a man and a woman *and* that marriage is between two people. If you don’t follow, please ask me later. As you might imagine on this subject, there were heartfelt opinions; differing views. Some were for; some were against. The debate was, on the whole, respectful and constructive.

As we moved to the vote, which will be reported to the Methodist Conference for their information only, one eminent member of Synod made perhaps the most telling contribution. I paraphrase what was said.

Are we in danger of missing the point of this report, this person said. It is not, am I for same sex marriage or am I against. It is, can I live in a church where we have disagreement on fundamental issues of theology and human living. Can I live in a church and live well with people with whom I profoundly disagree.

Same sex marriage is but one context where there is disagreement in the church world-wide. There will be other areas of disagreement which might exercise the church council this afternoon. When do we return to ‘in person worship’; how do we

continue to value those on Zoom; how do we spend our money or indeed use our building post Covid? We will disagree on these issues, never mind something as important as same sex marriage – how do we disagree well, as a resurrection community?

The community with whom we worship, will not always agree on some fundamental issues. But Jesus appears to his disciples in their confusion, and to us in our complexity, and invites us to be witnesses to his appearance. And his appearance signalled a new living. A new living beyond the death which had been caused by various factions wanting power; religious or political power. These resurrection appearances were about reminding the 'community', the disciples, to live as a resurrection community following Jesus – following the values of the kingdom he demonstrated in his ministry.

Here's a kingdom value which was noted yesterday, although I paraphrase, 'Can I live in a church and live well with people with whom I profoundly disagree.'

Living well in disagreement. A resurrection community.

*The vote in Synod by the way, on allowing same sex marriage in church, was actually a number of different resolutions – nothing's simple – but roughly, it was 2/3rds in favour. That vote alters nothing. It is, along with the other Synods, just an indication to the Methodist Conference, who will vote in the summer.*

## **A community who touch Jesus**

The Easter resurrection stories have been compelling this year for me for one reason: touch.

<sup>39</sup>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.'

The resurrection stories are in many ways, ambiguous. In Matthew 28, the disciples take hold of his feet; John 20: to Mary: 'do not touch me'; John 20: to Thomas, put your hand in my side – doubt no more but believe.

Luke 24: 'Touch me and see'.

We are a people who have been denied touch. A handshake. A hug. Whether you are royalist or not, the solitary figure of the Queen, sat in St George's Chapel yesterday, in her deepest loss, no-one to put their hand on her arm, seemed to represent so many who have experienced the same during Covid. The denial of touch.

In the light of Covid, denied the human or animal need for touch, the digital medium has provided means of communication, but what it can't do, is to offer touch. Julia Kristeva writes of our interaction digitally:

‘This has not abolished loneliness’ but has ‘compressed it in messages and data.’<sup>i</sup>

Perhaps this begins to explain my feelings in my sabbatical, or perhaps yours.

There are virtual reality ways of touching over the digital sphere ( ... not on Zoom worship ... yet!) They are high tech versions of those distressing scenes at care homes where families hold loved ones through rubber gloves set in glass walls. These attempts to devise methods of touch, writes Richard Kearney, testify ‘to the desperate human need to touch and be touched, come what may.’<sup>ii</sup> You see, the desire to return to church is partly rooted in basic human instinct – to meet – and to touch – in community.

Kearney reflects further, that, despite its drawbacks, Covid has given birth to digital expressions to enable people to connect. Because community is vital. ‘From the earliest of times’, he writes, ‘touch was seen as a power of healing through accompaniment.’<sup>iii</sup>

So, Jesus, appearing to his disciples, physically inviting them to touch, or at times, to avoid touch, speaks of a humanity; their basic need; the very purpose of the incarnation of God – (the Christmas story) – to be fleshly present in a community. But in a post Covid world, a digital world, how to marry connectivity where the sense of touch is restricted.

Richard Kearney again:

‘The challenge is to find new’ ways of ‘accommodation between our digital and lived bodies’. ... We will need to acknowledge ‘their differences’ – that’s the difference between digital and in-person ‘while exploring’ ways ‘of mutually enhancing’ relationship.<sup>iv</sup>

In other words, we will need to live in both a digital and ‘in person’ world. They are different. How can those differences live well together – to borrow a phrase?

Kearney concludes:

‘It is clear that to live fully in a post-pandemic world we will need both virtual imagination and incarnate action. Both digital touch and live touch.’<sup>v</sup>

The gains made digitally in lockdown are he says, ‘too great to ignore in the name of some nostalgia for bygone times.’

Can we become a community at Hinde Street, who touch Jesus both in a physical location, and digitally, and so witness to a new, vibrant community of Christ for a post-pandemic age?

## **Conclusion**

A community of disciples

A resurrection community.

A community who touch Jesus

<sup>36</sup>While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'

Jesus appears to his disciples, and to us this Easter.

Hallelujah. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Kearney, Richard, *What happened to touch?* in Ed. Hampton, Alexander J. B., *Pandemic, Ecology and Theology, Perspectives on Covid-19*, Oxford, 2021 p32

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid p33

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid p33

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid p34

<sup>v</sup> Ibid p35