

Ascension Day, 13 May 2021

St Luke certainly knows how to pull the rug from under our feet: ‘On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”’ Not much sympathy there. You discover that the person you care about most in the world, tortured, crucified and lain in a tomb, has disappeared, and this is the reaction you get from a couple of complete know-it-all strangers. Their bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired.

As it does when they pop up again forty days later ‘When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”’ Well, at least they were consistent. Here the gobsmacked followers of Jesus had just seen him emulate Elijah, although minus the whirlwind, and you would have been forgiven for thinking that their gawping upwards was not in the least bit surprising. But not much sensitivity from our two mysterious visitors: ‘what are you looking up *there* for? Haven’t you got any idea?’

Well, of course, they haven’t. They must have been at least, well, perplexed by what all this might have meant. Luke tells us that the disciples return to Jerusalem after Jesus ascends into heaven, and they praise God daily in the Temple, but they must have been doing this with ever so slightly forced smiles and tremulous voices. What on earth was going on...?

If one thing characterises the reaction of the women at the empty tomb it is probably shock. Who has taken him?! The characteristic of the ascension episode is probably awe. Jaw-dropping incredulity at what was happening. Between the shock of the resurrection and the awe of the ascension there was a lot of confused disciples just becoming more and more confused. Which is not a million miles, if we are honest about it, from where are, when we inhabit the space between the Resurrection and the Ascension.

So, why compare the Resurrection with shock? Surely the Resurrection is about joy abounding, isn’t it? We are delivered from sin and death, hallelujah! What is not to praise? But how many of us, in this time and in this place, can actually say, hand on heart, that they can equate the resurrection with total joy? That is not what the disciples felt after all: not total joy, but also confusion, wariness, fear...what was going to be expected of them? What, in fact, is going to be expected of us? We ask this because for us, the Resurrection is *not* the grand finale of our Christian pilgrimage, but merely the end of the prologue. And we would be deceiving ourselves if we thought that we would not occasionally encounter the same varied reactions that the disciples encountered in

their resurrection journey. It is also hard to say we will ever get to an end point of complete satisfaction about how our journeys have gone thus far. It's not all progress and prosperity.

John's Gospel, for instance, is not a linear unfolding of the glory of Jesus, telling his story from beginning to end, but cyclical, as it is meant to be: get to the end, and you arrive back at the beginning again; the historical Jesus *is* the eternal Word, and attending to the eternal Word made flesh is not just where our pilgrimage starts, but continues through our lives. Even as we draw our last breath, something about our relationship with Jesus takes us from the upper room on that first Easter Day right back to the opening words of John's Gospel: In the beginning...

And where is this cyclical pilgrimage played out? At the Ascension moment, the moment of awe, the moment when we are asked not to look up to heaven, but around us; this is where you must see your future and live your life.

Between the two poles of shock and awe the whole gamut of human emotion runs its course, but the awe was not an excuse for the disciples to convince themselves that this was the end; that the mysterious reappearance of Jesus after his resurrection was a forty-day interlude in metaphysics before the reality of life reasserted itself as he disappeared above the clouds. No, it was a preparation. Do not seek the living among the dead. Do not look up to heaven. Instead apprehend the resurrection, the inner life of God by seeking the living and looking around you. All this has not been to give you as a feeling of self-satisfaction that the confusions, challenges and complications of following Jesus had all been worth it – we got there in the end! Rather, it is about the insight into the fuller reality of God and what this means for the world. To seek him among the living; to see him in the world around us.

And that charge, that prescription, is just as valid for us as it was for the witnesses to these events. We may think that the Resurrection is an excuse not to see Jesus in the world around us because we are privy to a certain kind of knowledge and belief. I believe in Jesus, and I *know* where I am going... We may also think that Jesus' Ascension gets us off the hook of caring about the world that much because heaven is now where the action is. But these are foolish misconceptions of what the twin poles of Resurrection and Ascension are all about. Do not look for the living among the dead! Do not stand there looking up to heaven!

Instead look around you. See the living Lord in the lives of the living, in you and me, see him animating our lives, and the lives of others in mutual acts of service. Seek him, not in some abstract contemplation of the celestial sphere, but in the hard edges of the world around us. Shock leads to seeing; awe to seeking. Thus is Jesus seen and sought. He may be out of sight, but he is still in the world, where we have the chance to meet him. Every day.