

Following Easter : Hard of Hearing

Sunday 26th April 2020

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Rev. Dr. Colin S. Marshall

Readings: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, Luke 24:13-35, Acts 2:36-41, 1 Peter 1:17-23

In communications theory a writer named Michael Jacobs has observed that in there are today, many areas in life in which it has become less easy for people to speak to each other. A number of years ago Jacobs observed that there is a problem with modern communications, electronic media have meant we can communicate but many little, intrinsic and important pieces of the communication process are left out. Over the last few weeks many of us have been able to communicate via electronic means, be that the web, electronic conferencing, the phone or emails, txts and the like. This is a blessing of the current world – we can at least communicate in a time such as this. Following so closely after ANZAC Day we are reminded of those who have historically given their lives in service and been often a world apart from loved ones, unable to communicate for days, weeks, months or even years. How hard it must have been for people to be receiving letters, postcards and telegrams well after they had been advised their loved had been killed or died of disease or injury so far away. Some are experiencing this same type of loss again today as the world fights a different kind of war. For us today our communication is challenged differently. A number of people pf people have mentioned that online services and meetings have been really worthwhile but they still miss the little incidental comments, the side chats and engagements that are very much part of the essence of who we are as a community as we share life and faith together. Watching the NZ comedian Dai Henwood the other night saying how difficult it was to speak to a camera or a zoom conference when you are so used to interacting with people's emotions, laughter, pain I knew just where he was coming from as I'm sure many of you do. Our inability to hear properly creates a struggle when it is a physical ailment. It is a challenge when it is a situational abruption. And it is catastrophic when it becomes a spiritual deafness.

This morning's texts remind us that the inability to hear spiritually, to live in isolation and distance is, sadly, very real, even for those who are and have been close to the Lord, let alone those who have wandered away or not found their way home yet. Luke's account takes us back to Israel in the days immediately following Jesus' death. We know that the immediate core of the disciples hid in fear, but not all of them, and there were of course many others. In the aftermath of Jesus death, they quickly turned to go back to ordinary life. On that hot dusty road two of these would-be disciples were walking along on the road to Emmaus about ten kilometres from Jerusalem. They had waited until the heat of the day had passed and it was a pleasant walk, but their reflections were anything but comfortable. Their lives had been dramatically changed in their association with Jesus but now He was dead and gone. Yes, that had heard the hysterical tales the women had told about Jesus' tomb being empty and having seen angels, but they had little time for the women's nonsense. Understandably they were deeply sad. Sad that the Jesus whom they had loved and followed had died and so horribly, shamefully. Sad that all they had hoped was not going to come about. Sad that they had misunderstood and had such high hopes. Sad that their community that had become increasingly strong and joyous had been so brutally torn apart. Sad that hope had gone for the future. How had they got it so wrong?

You have to love the way Luke so casually mentions what happens next, "**Jesus himself came up and walked along with them...**" One would expect that they would

be both stunned and overjoyed and have all sorts of questions ... but no. Luke says that **“they were kept from recognising Him”**. Scholars have debated what this means. Some see it as a divine limit on their capabilities in this moment so that Jesus could use the opportunity for what would follow. Other scholars see this as a Satanic act determined to stop or hinder Jesus carrying out the next part of His plan in the world. Like the women, the disciples were clearly unprepared to see a healthy, very alive, Jesus and one wonders if their brains simply could have taken it in anyway. Regardless, in some manner, they were kept from recognising Jesus and this leads to a fascinating dialogue.

A little side-track here. Hebrews 13:2 the author tells us, **“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”** So, here’s a thought, a *modus operandi*, if you will. Heavenly beings have historically walked amongst us unrecognised. For God to get His work done on earth it is not necessary that we are privy to all the details or even the people or beings involved. If it has been necessary for angels to go about unrecognised for varying periods, and incidentally that’s a challenge for us in how we treat others, we should not be too surprised to find the resurrected Jesus doing the same thing. That a single, non-threatening stranger would join them on the road, especially if they were not too far from Jerusalem, was hardly surprising. People generally preferred to travel in groups, even on short journeys, due to the incidence of violent crime.

When Jesus asked them what they were talking about their despair becomes evident. They stop walking and look at the ground. How do you put the upending of your life into words? How do you articulate the loss of hope and dreams and work and effort? How do you explain what you have given up and how you feel you have let others down even when it is totally beyond control? And how did this stranger come to be so out of touch with what was going on?

Jesus plays dumb. I think I can say that. Like the teacher and Rabbi He is, Jesus used the classic Jewish question methodology to open up the conversation. As a teacher the technique is a simple, get someone to explain what they know or think they know and the gaps in their knowledge becomes evident. Then that gap, and the hole in their faith, echoes like a deep, dark, bottomless chasm: **“we had hoped He was the One who was going to redeem Israel”** what’s more, to add insult to injury, Jesus body has been stolen and some of the women had a vision of angels saying He was alive and when our friends went to the tomb it was empty. The emotion of the language almost hides the content. **“We had hoped.”** Our hope has gone. Our dream for the future, for our nation even, has gone. How horrible it is in any situation when hope is gone. 1 Chronicles 29:15 puts it so succinctly: **“Our days on earth are like a shadow without hope.”** In their despair the disciples silently lament like Job 17:15 ... **“where then is my hope— who can see any hope for me?”**

Jesus can answer that unspoken question like no other. He breaks into their self-pity like a slap in the face. **“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”** Suddenly this quiet, uninformed stranger changes before their eyes. No physically but intellectually. He has blatantly rebuked them. Their very manhood is challenged like God challenged Job. How foolish you are! How slow to believe you are! How deaf you are! Didn’t you hear what Jesus told you? What the Scriptures told you? Then in their shock, before they can protest or even stammer out a response, Jesus begins with what must have been one of the greatest Bible studies of all time. How I

long to have been there! Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself. This is something that we need to think about seriously.

Jesus has risen from the dead and, other than making a few appearances to a few key people, the first serious engagement Jesus has with anyone is to do a Bible Study. Ever thought about that? Jesus first significant resurrection act is to do Bible Study! Why might that be?

The answer is that people are hard of hearing. We have no better evidence of that than what is going on today. Medical experts, even philanthropists like Bill Gates, have been on about pandemics for years but who has taken any serious notice? No pun intended by the way. No one. Bill Gates said in an interview yesterday that in the last five years not a single government around the world has taken the issue seriously enough to pour decent resource into preparing for a pandemic. Even having already experienced a few viruses coming close. And that's the nub. We know what it's like. Sometimes things go in one ear and straight out the other. Actually, sometimes things don't even get in because we get so distracted. Other times things stick for a while and we ponder them but don't actually do anything about it. Sometimes we get stuck in but then enthusiasm wains. But there are times when something clicks and we pour our lives and our resources into it because we consider it important. Things like the ones we love, our faith, our jobs and hobbies ... or at least, hopefully, some of these. How do we change this pattern? We have to engage both emotion and brain. Not one or other but both. People, emotion, the busyness of life, lack of time, energy, resources, anything and everything can distract us from staying on task, on point, from hearing critical information. Focus brings that back ... a spiritual awakening, a hearing to the core of our being that engages heart and head. So, this is what Jesus did.

In looking into the Scriptures Jesus went through and expounded piece by piece all the texts pertaining to His life and what had to happen. His own disciples should have known from Jesus that the Messiah had to die so that He could be raised victorious. Many in the wider community however would not have known that being so focussed on the hope of an all-conquering king coming to restore their fortunes. Of course, His glorious return is now in sight but, once again, it will not be of the nature expected by the religious authorities. For those who know Him it will be a wonderful season.

In the disciples we see the growing response to this. Clearly, they have warmed to Jesus. When He plans to walk on past where they are stopping for the night, they invite Him to stay. Their duty of hospitality is happy engaged, mind and heart again in union.

We know what happens next. As Jesus breaks the bread and shares with them their eyes are opened and they recognise Him and Jesus miraculously disappears from in front of them. Their discussion is enlightening. As Jesus had shared with them their hearts had burned, hope had been rekindled, their fears had been overcome, their lives put back on track. The mission was not over it was just beginning. The plan had all been their in writing the whole time. How slow they had been to listen, how hard their hearts to let the gospel really get in. Now Jesus has opened them up through the Scriptures they are truly alive again.

We mentioned before that belief and action go hand in hand. What the disciples do next more than confirms this. They immediately return to Jerusalem. If travel by day was dangerous by night infinitely more so. Their weariness and fatigue are gone. Their darkness is now a burning light. Their sloth had turn to leaping energy and they are off. Off up the hill back to Jerusalem to share the news that Jesus is alive and His plan is

being worked out just as it has always been planned to be. And what's more – He came and shared with us! The Lord has risen indeed!

I pray that you are not hard of hearing, that each day your walk with the Lord becomes closer and that He opens your eyes, ears, heart and head to His Word.

God bless, Amen.