

USPG 3rd of Easter.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

A very happy Eastertide to all of our USPG friends across the world who are using this sermon today. It has, for many of us, been an Easter like none other. The Covid 19 pandemic continuing to cause devastating numbers of illnesses and deaths across some of our partner churches – and our hearts continue to reach out, along with our love and prayers to our partners in Brazil, India, South Africa and many other places where cases of illness and deaths remain so high; and we commit ourselves in USPG to pray and work for an equitable roll out of vaccines acts the world.

And here in Britain this week of Eastertide as we give thank for the life of HRH Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, whose funeral service many of us may have watched yesterday on the television, we remember his life of service with thanksgiving, and continue to pray for the Queen and the royal family as this difficult time.

Our Christian acclamation remains: Alleluia, Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia! Albeit it, this year, for so many, in such difficult circumstances and against a backdrop of such suffering.

Our Gospel reading today, and these past two weeks of the Easter season have reminded us that the first Easter message was delivered against a backdrop of suffering and fear. When Jesus bypassed the locked door and entered the room where the disciples were huddled together they were startled and terrified. No wonder his first words needed to be the ancient Hebrew greeting Shalom, 'Peace be with you'.

But, we need to remember that for the disciples, it took time for the message to sink in. The tomb on Easter Day was terrifyingly empty, and as we look at the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection and the days that followed we read vividly of the people's quite negative reactions: perplexity, terror, hiding their faces in fear, weeping, shaking, not understanding, alarm, disbelief, amazement, and going home alone.

Our familiarity with this wonderful resurrection story can blind us to its unfamiliarity and terror to the disciples and followers at the time. Add that to the disciples' sheer exhaustion - mental, physical, and spiritual, having been through the events of Holy Week with Jesus. The resurrection was by no means an instant overcoming of their fears. That's why, in our Gospel reading today, the doors were firmly shut, and the disciples were still quaking behind them, and they were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.

They had seen Jesus killed just two days before, on the cross. And then, to make matters worse, on Easter day his body had disappeared — Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, were emphatically certain that they had encountered him outside of the empty tomb, prompting Peter had rushed off to see for himself. Two others of their group had just raced into the room, back from Emmaus from where they claimed they had walked and talked with the Risen Jesus but had failed to recognise him in the fading light; but had known him instantly in the breaking of the bread

And now, here he was again, in their midst. Or was he? "No, it's a ghost," they decide — but then again, "No, no, it's not; it is him; it's Jesus." "Shalom - Peace be with you," he said and, of course, when he spoke to them they knew it was him.

As he showed them his pierced hands and feet, and ate broiled fish with them, they recognised it was indeed the Jesus they had always known — a recognition in which they now felt more and more assured as he reminded them of all he had told them and taught them. And they needed to be sure, because they had just been through so much with him, and unless they were sure, how could they preach with conviction; the faith of those who came after them, including us, would be based on that conviction.

Yes, this was the same Jesus. And yet he is different too. He had risen from the dead, he had conquered death, and opened wide the door of the Kingdom of Heaven; all power and authority had been given to him. He was different, but the same. Life would never be the same again.

In our reading from Acts 3 today, which jumps ahead of the Gospel story, we see Peter, in the new found courage of the Pentecostal Spirit, reminding the Israelites that they had disowned Jesus, the same Jesus that he had disowned on the night of Jesus' arrest. But now we hear Peter's confident affirmation of his faith — a faith that has transformed his life in every way.

At the end of the Gospel passage Jesus commissions the disciples. They are to be witness to him — the same old Jesus and yet, at the same time, the risen Lord Jesus. They are to go to all the nations of the world — and be witness to the Good News of the risen Jesus.

That is the commission that we at USPG — our partners, supporters, friends, volunteers, staff continue to share today — to be witnesses to Jesus. We have received that same commission. We are called to be witness to the risen Jesus whom we encounter in all sorts of people and in all sorts of places, around the wonderful Anglican Communion and beyond. We are called to help one another in building up faith, to bear one another's burdens — none more so than in this current climate of global pandemic, and to proclaim the Gospel of Christ afresh in each generation, culture and people group. What a privilege to be a part of that global mission movement with USPG. Let's do it together, with the faith, the hope and the certainty that the risen Christ goes before us.

Alleluia Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.