

BIBLE READINGS (from GNB Ewan Gallop)

Luke 24:13–16, 28–49

Acts 3:1–16

May your word live within us, faithful God

In our thinking, in our speaking and in our doing

MESSAGE The continuing story of Jesus

I wonder what some of your favourite **stories** are, stories that you carry with you through life – whether stories in books, stories in movies or stories that are treasured from your childhood or in your family? Two of my favourite stories growing up were *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien. As a young person I loved these adventures that inspired one's imagination.



As an adult, I can read more into the story than I could as a child, recognizing several Christian themes. The wizard, Gandalf, for instance, sacrifices his life to save his friends and later comes back into the story in a resurrected and transformed way, yet still as Gandalf. There are clear echoes here of the Easter story.



But Gandalf's role is part of a larger story of redemption for the peoples of Middle Earth from powers that threaten to overwhelm and enslave them, a story with old and ancient roots.



In the Bible, two of my favourite books are Luke and Acts; they were the focus of my doctoral studies. One reason I like these books so much is the simple yet profound insight from the author Luke – who wrote both of these books – that the story of Jesus **didn't end with his resurrection.**

Yes, the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus were pivotal events that we remember and ponder each year at Easter, but the story carried on **beyond** Easter. The Jesus story continued on in new directions and included some unexpected plot twists, but it all forms part of one bigger story, **God's story**.

This morning we get a glimpse into how these new directions emerged as well as an example of what this new chapter of the story looked like in the book of Acts.



But first things first. We are still in the season of Easter so today's readings tell us **some of the ways** that followers of Jesus encountered him again after the events of Easter. In the wonderfully evocative story of the two walking the road to Emmaus, Jesus is encountered and recognised in the **fresh understanding of the Scriptures** and through the **breaking of bread**, which symbolises communion.



Later, Jesus stands among the disciples **in person** – not as a ghost or a vision – but as a person with flesh and bones who can be seen and touched and who eats real food. This story has hallmarks of the later debates of Christians who pondered both whether Jesus really died – and whether he really rose from death. In his version of the story, Luke portrays Jesus as truly crucified, dead and buried, and also as truly alive again.

Another aspect of this story is that Jesus encounters people both **at home** and **on the road**, both in their **dejection** and **despair** and in their **joy** and **wonder**. He encounters individuals, small groups of believers – where two or three are gathered in his name – and in larger communal gatherings.

These stories, then, report and interpret what happened in the emerging Christian community after Easter. They provide teaching and encouragement for later Christians who never met Jesus in person – people like us. And the encouragement for us is that Jesus can still be encountered long after the events of Easter. How we might explain this

is a matter of theology ... but the lived experience of Christians is that we can expect to encounter the risen Jesus in numerous ways ...

- through studying the Scriptures together
- through communion
- and – as shown in the book of Acts – through everyday meetings with people

The comforting message is

'Peace be with you' ... don't be afraid ... don't be startled ... but do expect your life to be challenged and changed by an encounter with the risen Jesus.

The important thing that Luke then does in his telling of the gospel story is to add selected episodes from the emerging and spreading Christian community. The events of Easter act as a hinge or pivot point as the message of Jesus spreads from Jerusalem throughout the Greco-Roman world and eventually to Rome. Luke is at pains to show that Jesus' story is actually part of a much larger unfolding story about God and God's plans – not just for Jesus – but for the whole world.



How does Luke achieve this bigger perspective? Basically by linking the Jesus story back to Israel's Scriptures and what **must be fulfilled according to God's plan**. These OT Scriptures – when rightly read and rightly interpreted ... according to early Christians like Luke – point to the birth, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus as events long planned by God and revealed in the Scriptures, rather than as random or unexpected events.

Although the story arc of Jesus did not follow the popular expectation of the Messiah, his experience of rejection, suffering and resurrection was found in the **lived experience of David** whose life was seen as a model for the Messiah. So rather than focus on David's victories in battle, the early Christians read the **psalms of David** and saw rejection, suffering and vindication by God.

But the Scriptures – rightly interpreted – have another task for the Messiah to accomplish

which is to share the message of forgiveness, repentance and new life to **all peoples** and **all nations**, beginning from Jerusalem.

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. (Luke 24:46-47)

This aspect of the Messiah's mission is taken up by the early church, a mission that is strongly linked with Jesus. Luke, Matthew and John all end their Gospels with a similar message and mandate from Jesus. But of these three, it is only Luke who **continues the story** and shows what happened next.

We're offered numerous cameos or glimpses. In the story we heard from Acts this morning, Peter and John are going up to the temple to pray ... and show compassion to a beggar. As a crowd gathers, they share a message about what God is now doing through Jesus, who is variously named as the

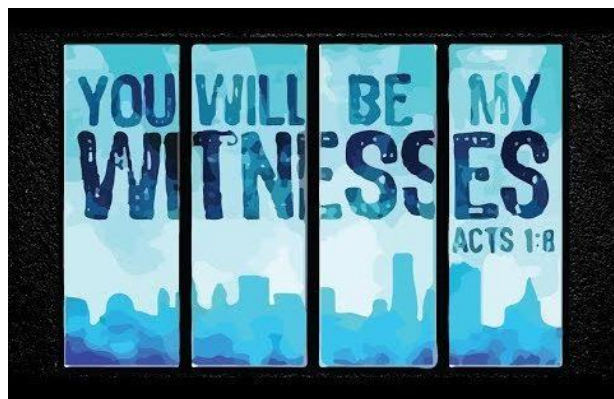


holy and righteous one, God's servant and a prophet like Moses ... linking the story of Jesus back into the centuries old Jewish story about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and his people. The new twist is that this story is not just for Jewish people but is for the whole world. It's because these first followers of Jesus took this commission very seriously that the good news of Jesus grew and spread – and turned the first century world upside down.

So where do **we** fit in to this story?

And what are **we** called to do?

Like the disciples, we too are called to be **witnesses**, people who share what we have seen and heard of Jesus in **our** lives and in the lives of others. We too are called to carry on and embody his message and his mission into the world.



It's why we have ministries like **helping hand** and **playgroup** and **Drop-In** – each of which bring the message of God's care and love to people in the wider community. It's why ministries like **Kids Hope** are also important – as we connect with younger people and help to bring the same message about God's love and acceptance of every person to them. We do this through taking the time to sit with, listen to and encourage these young people who often face difficult issues in their lives.

Our mission as Christians in the world is different to other community organisations. We have a **distinct** calling and mandate – which includes loving our neighbour and seeking justice – but also witnessing to the good news of Jesus and the abundant life in God that comes through encountering Jesus. We do this through both our words and how we speak them and also through our actions.

This is our unique and special calling in the world that no other community group can do. Let us take heart and be of good courage, because it is Jesus who calls us to this mission, God who strengthens us and the Spirit who guides and helps us in our weakness.

Amen.