



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 19 April by the Reverend Mary Lewis, Priest Vicar**

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## **Road to Emmaus**

*Luke 24. 13-25*

If you walk in the spring on the top of the Mendips, there is a chance to hear skylarks. They are almost guaranteed to lift the heart and mind as you watch them ascend, for as Robert Browning writes in his poem *Paracelsus*, "The lark soars up and up, shivering for very joy". They do indeed seem to shiver as they ascend and sing their hearts out with a continuous thread of song that has within it the most subtle and beautiful variations. What good news it is to know that skylarks are thriving and in Eastertide there is another sort of good news to listen for, to watch out for, and to discover; the Risen Jesus.

Cleopas and his friend who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus were distraught. They were in despair and confusion for their world had collapsed with the death of Jesus. And so, they turned their backs on Jerusalem and set out to leave behind the terrible memories of the last few days. But what a surprise awaited them. Jesus had not deserted them. He joins their walk as a seeming stranger, listening to their disappointment and correcting their misguided expectations of a political Messiah. Then as they share a meal and break bread, the stranger is revealed as Jesus and they rush back to Jerusalem to share the extraordinary news that he is alive.

Rowan Williams asks in his book *Resurrection*, written some years before he became Archbishop of Canterbury, "Why is it good news to say, 'Jesus is risen'?" How might we answer that question? Jesus has just overcome death itself enabling the gift of eternal life and he has breathed new life into the whole creation! As the Easter anthem proclaims, "For as in Adam all die: even so in Christ shall all be made alive". Such are the broad brushstrokes of the Easter gospel. What else underlies the joy of the disciples as they encounter the Risen Christ?

Jesus in his crucifixion was a victim who had been falsely accused and yet who now appeared to his followers not only alive, but without judgement for those who had crucified him. In Jesus, we see one who had been persecuted, but who refused to become a persecutor, breaking the chain of how being a victim

typically leads to the judgement and oppression of others. Jesus' refusal to hurt others, despite being hurt himself, has the potential to transform relationships.

Rowan Williams writes, "We are all of us, in some measure, shut off from each other: our own individual options for violence fade into an overall background of violence. We are all born into a world where there is already a history of oppression and victimization: our moral and spiritual growth does not occur in a vacuum. And so, before we can be conscious of it, the system of oppressor-victim relation absorbs us".

Everyone is, to some extent, caught up in this psychological and sometimes physical cycle of being hurt or hurting. And victimisation and oppression of others on a small scale can and does, get magnified to levels of war and conflict between countries. But this pattern was broken by Jesus. It was broken by every action he made in his life, and it was finally broken for all eternity through his death and resurrection. Jesus was an unjust victim of violence, but he never offered violence in exchange for violence. Jesus, in perfect obedience to the Father, refused the role of oppressor; he does no violence, he utters no condemnation, he has no will to hurt those who hurt him or to exclude or diminish another. And so, the pattern of victim and oppressor is overcome and another reality dawns, that of inclusiveness and forgiveness and the healing of memories of guilt and hurt locked in the past. But only in and through Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord is it possible to find such forgiveness and love.

And this is affirmed in the resurrection stories. The disciples are all guilty of deserting Jesus in his time of greatest need. Cleopas and his friend were not part of the inner circle of disciples, but they had been in Jerusalem when Jesus underwent his trial and death. Everyone there must have known about the crucifixion, and so they must feel some guilt, some responsibility. But in the encounter with Jesus, there was no judgement, rather their hearts were filled with joy. On the road, Jesus had let them talk of the failure and anguish of what had happened, healing the memory of what had just passed and enabling the encounter with the risen One bringing new hope and life.

This process of the healing of memory and non-judgement is seen so profoundly in the encounter of Peter with the Risen Christ on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Although Peter and the other disciples had seen the Risen Lord, seven of them had returned to their fishing - perhaps still unsure what the future held - but this further encounter with Jesus was decisive. After the shared meal, Jesus' threefold interrogation of Peter recapitulates his threefold denial of Jesus on the night of the trial. Simon, not quite yet Peter, has to recognize himself as betrayer before there can be healing. What Peter has to learn, and perhaps what we have to learn, is that his betrayal does not make God betray. His calling as Peter, the

rock on which the church will be built, still stands, despite all that has happened, waiting to be lived out. The three-fold affirmation of love which Peter gives to Christ, enables a healing of memory, the restoration of courage and the commissioning of him as apostle.

While Rowan Williams writes of how the Easter stories present us with a variety of patterns of new life, to answer his question, "Why is it good news to say that Jesus is risen?", one reply might be, that the Risen Jesus comes to us now, to heal troubled memories through the assurance of love and so sets us free to live and discover the new pattern of life that refuses to judge or diminish another but which rather seeks to uplift everyone into the new life of Christ.

This new life is also about community. For the community of those in Christ can be both a penitent and a hopeful community, a community whose concern is to stand against all oppression, exclusion and violence, a community that transcends the oppressor-oppressed cycle and which creates the ground for the sanctification and growth of every person.

The earliest church was such a community as described in Acts, after repentance and baptism. Was this an impossible ideal or was it what community looks like when fully immersed into the life of the Risen Jesus? A community of resurrection.

After the resurrection, we learn through the Risen Jesus, that God's loving presence will never fail. The destructive choices and decisions that people can make are set against the backcloth of God's constant and eternal commitment of love, his everlasting invitation to open ourselves to his transforming grace.

I finish with a verse of an Easter poem by Adam Bittleston:

*Time is no longer empty with the Risen Christ,  
In our heart's beat his living grace awakes;  
Into our house the Easter air is breathed  
With joy that heals our life.  
Amen.*

The Reverend Mary Lewis  
Priest Vicar

19 April 2026