

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday of Easter – Year A

RCL Readings – Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31.

ACNA Readings – Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 111; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31.

Introduction. As we continue through the Easter season, we return to the resurrection of Jesus as you would expect; this can only ever be a good thing because the resurrection is foundational to our faith. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:14, “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

Common Theme. The common theme of these passages is the effect of the resurrection. The resurrection of the Lord is a one-off event, but it is not an event consigned to history. The resurrection makes it possible for many to know the Lord personally, to understand truly that he lives and that believing in him makes a difference. All of the readings are looking at the effects of knowing God both in this life and eternally. The Psalms may be pre the earthly revelation of Jesus, but their focus and power ring familiar in the New Testament readings which help us understand the power of the resurrection.

Acts 2:14a, 22-32. The context of this passage is Pentecost morning when a man – Peter – who had previously denied Jesus three times is now so assured of his faith that he can stand up in Jerusalem and address an entire crowd on the subject of Jesus. It is such a transformation.

In verse 22, there is a real bluntness to the way in which Peter is speaking to his fellow Israelites; it should be noted that he is addressing his own people, the Israelites, not Gentiles. There is a cancer that runs through the Church that dismisses the Jewish people and almost forgets that Jesus himself and the earliest members of the Church were Jewish. Peter, as a Jew, is speaking to those who had gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost, the offering of the first fruits of the harvest. He reminds them that Jesus was a man – one who was amongst them – and that he was accredited by God. He is almost asking how they could not have noticed that God proved to you who Jesus is by the miracles, wonders, and signs he did whilst among them. The people to whom he was speaking were not atheists or those who worshipped the false gods of the Greek and Roman culture. These were people who believed in God, the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and it is to them that Peter, a fellow believer, is reaching out to show them they missed the Messiah.

Those who know the Hebrew Scriptures ought to be aware of all the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah and whilst it may be true that we perhaps see these more clearly in the light of the revelation of the Messiah; it is the Jews who should have been grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures and should have been more aware of what God had planned. As verse 23 of Peter's speech states, there is no surprise or accident going on here. God had a deliberate plan, which we understand is revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, but rather than recognise what God was doing, they nailed Jesus to a cross. The fact that Peter includes the phrase, “with the help of the wicked” perhaps implies that they had sided with rebellion against God rather than recognising the revelation of God's Messiah. However, this had always been God's intention. In this section, we understand that the rebellion of humanity is working hand in hand with the sovereignty of God – a mystery that is beyond our fullest understanding.

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One of my favourite words in Scripture is *but* because so often *but* illustrates the power of God as sin is turned to repentance, evil to good, death to resurrection, curse to blessing, and *but* appears at the beginning of verse 24 as Peter speaks of the transformation God brings in raising Jesus to life. The rebellion of the Israelites, as they sided with the wicked is overturned and there is proof that the plan of God with regard to salvation through his Son cannot be thwarted. God raises his Son as the prophecies state because there is no way that death can hold on to the Son of God, demonstrating to us, again as picked up in 1 Corinthians 15, that there is a resurrection hope for all who will believe.

To emphasise what he is saying about the hope for all, Peter now quotes Psalm 16, detailing how King David himself knew the certainty of resurrection well ahead of the resurrection of Jesus, which we will deal with in more detail below. So in verse 29, Peter again addresses them as “Fellow Israelites,” which shows he identifies them with his people and is a reminder to us reading it so many years later that he was addressing Jewish people. This is not about replacing the Jewish people, this is about a message that is as important to the Jewish people as it is to those who are not Jewish. He calls David “patriarch.” They would understand about whom he was talking. He is talking about one of their own, the greatest king Israel ever knew. A sinner yes, but a king that led Israel in the ways of the Lord, despite his own weaknesses. He reminds them that David is buried in Jerusalem and that they can even go and visit his tomb, but that he did not see death as an end for him.

Verse 30 refers to David as a prophet who spoke of a promise from God that he would place one of David's descendants on his throne and David believed that. He knew the Messiah would come and – as in verse 31 – Peter reminds them that David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, who could not be left in death. David knew hundreds of years ago that the day Peter is speaking of would come. We may wonder how quickly the penny dropped for those who were listening. 3,000 would be baptised, but Peter is telling them they had rejected God.

The sovereignty of God is so evident in this section – even though not explicitly stated – for Peter's final comment is to remind them that God not only raised Jesus to life but that he did it publicly for they are all witnesses to it. They may have missed what God was doing in the sending of the Messiah and in his earthly ministry in Israel and Judah, but they cannot miss the resurrection.

Psalm 16. When one thinks of David, it is perhaps more often as a king rather than a prophet, but Peter told us in Acts that David was a prophet. Whether as king or prophet, David is one who believed and trusted in God – even if he did commit some dreadful acts in his lifetime. This Psalm starts with an appeal to God for protection – not just God standing guard – but for God to be a place of refuge. This speaks so much more of long-term security than something akin to the presence of a bodyguard. It is where Israel should have remained instead of making alliances with other nations, with people God had told them not to ally with. It is the same for us today. We are meant to remain faithful to God and not find security outside of him.

Verse two explains why. David addresses God personally, as his Lord, recognising that without God he has nothing that is good. In a time when the Israelites possibly saw themselves corporately – the Israelites – David knew he could have a personal relationship with the Lord. More than that, he knew with whom he should mix for he speaks in verse three of those who are holy, set apart for God, that

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they are the ones he delights in. David is speaking about the need to be with God's people, perhaps in contrast to others in the history of Israel who had not done this, mentioned in verse four, for example. It is a similar thought to Peter's speech that the Israelites had mixed with the wicked. By contrast, David does not want to. He does not want an association with those who chase after false gods, for their fate is to suffer even more and David states categorically that he will not make offerings to any god other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He knows where his hope lies.

Verse five develops this point further. Just as Peter was speaking to the crowd about the need to ally oneself with the plan of God and not mix with the wicked, so here David states that his only focus will be the Lord; for in him is security and that he does not have suffering but a delightful inheritance (v. 6). As a Christian, perhaps we can identify with where his thinking lies because we know that we have an inheritance in Jesus. David is so sure of where his loyalty should lie that he states he will praise the Lord even at night – a further indication that there is no room in his heart or mind to wander after false gods – no time to worship anyone other than God. He expects as part of this that the Lord will always keep him strong so that he is never shaken.

The Hebrew Scriptures teach about the resurrection of the dead. It would be fair to say that it is not as obvious a theme as it is in the New Testament, but David believed in the resurrection. Verse ten is very clear that David was not expecting to be abandoned to the realm of the dead or decay. It is thus, perhaps, not a surprise to see this Psalm used by Peter in his speech. He refers to David being buried in Jerusalem, but he also makes sure his audience hears that David did not believe that was his final resting place. So in verse 11, David concludes that God will show him the path of life and fill him with joy, and that the pleasures will be eternal.

1 Peter 1:3-9. In his speech, Peter directs people to think of the resurrection. In the Psalm, David looks forward to the resurrection. In this passage, Peter speaks of hope through the resurrection. Inevitably he praises God, calling him the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Peter addresses his listeners, he wants them to know that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is the father of the Lord Jesus. That same God has shown his mercy in giving us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The emphasis on mercy is a continuation of the Hebrew Scriptures. How often had God had mercy on the Israelites; this is to be a living hope – not a temporary one – and it is a hope that can only come through the resurrection of Jesus. Once a person is aware of that they know that their inheritance is everlasting, as David expected, an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade (v. 4).

The fact that verse four continues with teaching that the inheritance is kept in heaven for the believer is a beautiful picture of the sovereignty of God. This is not about humanity being able to do anything, it is not about the sacrificial system – which is dependent on the Israelite offering the right sacrifice; it is something that comes from God, something he secures. It is accessed through faith, nothing more, nothing less, and that faith keeps a believer shielded by God's power until the coming of salvation to be revealed in the last time. Faith keeps us going whilst we await the return of the Lord, just as David believed he would be kept strong even though he did not know the Messiah as we can know him.

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Although people still suffer in many ways (v. 6), the believer can rejoice because of their hope in God, made certain by the resurrection of Jesus. So why do we suffer? Verse seven explains. It proves how genuine our faith is, as it becomes worth so much more even than gold. As fire refines gold, our faith is refined by the troubles we encounter, but for the believer that leads us to bring praise, glory, and honour when Jesus returns.

David had not known the Messiah in person, but he persevered and believed according to the Psalm. Verse eight shows that the New Testament believer is no different in that respect. The believer has not seen the Messiah, but they love him all the same and even without seeing him they are able to believe in him to the point of an excess of joy, knowing the end result of their faith will be the salvation of the soul. It is interesting how much overlap there is with Psalm 16.

John 20:19-31. John's Gospel is so beautiful in the way that it presents Jesus and speaks of how Jesus deals with those who would be his followers. In this particular passage, we see Jesus in what can be best described as pastoral mode, looking after the needs of his followers.

No doubt subdued and confused, the disciples are together in the upper room on the first day of the week. One can imagine their conversations, perhaps asking "What next?" Their leader has been crucified but they have heard he has been resurrected. Peter has been to the tomb himself, but would they all believe his story? Did Peter truly understand what was happening? We can only guess the answer. Whatever is going on with regard to their understanding of Jesus, these are frightened men.

Verse 19 tells us the doors are locked for fear of the Jews. They probably thought that as the Jews had been partly responsible for the death of Jesus, they would be next as known followers of Jesus, especially if word was spreading that Jesus was alive. It would be in the interests of the Jews to silence the followers before things get totally out of hand. It is to these confused, frightened men, that Jesus suddenly appears saying "Peace be with you!" It is undoubtedly true that there are appearances of God in the Old Testament in varied ways, but this one comes to calm the worried men and it works because John records that they were overjoyed when they saw the Lord (v. 20). What is worthy of note is that Jesus shows them his hands and side. There is to be no doubt that this is indeed Jesus, who was crucified. This is not a ghost or someone masquerading as Jesus, this really is Jesus.

There is repetition in verse 21 of "Peace be with you". This should come as no surprise. What more could the disciples need except peace in their confusion and distress – hence the comment about Jesus showing his pastoral nature – but on this second utterance there is a powerful twist as Jesus breathes on them and tells them to "Receive the Holy Spirit". The breath of God has been evident throughout Scripture from as early as Genesis when God breathed life into Adam. Here life is breathed into the disciples in a way that is going to transform them. More than that he then tells them what would have been staggering news to their ears – namely that if they forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. The disciples' background is the sacrificial system and the need for God alone to be the forgiver. They had ministered with Jesus who himself had pronounced forgiveness, often with an accompanying miracle to show his power, but now they are to do it and even more; if they do not forgive, a person will not be forgiven. It is all too easy for today's believers to gloss over this as

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something that is very familiar, rather than to recognise the incredible impact it must have had on the first disciples.

For some reason, Thomas is missing and perhaps not surprisingly, he does not believe the others. He wants proof, he wants to see the nail marks in Jesus' hands and put his finger where the nails were and his hand in Jesus' side. It is of interest that what he actually asks to do is what Jesus had offered to the others. Verse 26 says that Thomas needed to wait a week before his encounter with the risen Jesus, but again Jesus appears. We know that his resurrection body must be different because he can come and stand among them through locked doors, but there is continuity in that the nail marks and spear mark are still there as he invites Thomas to put his finger on him before telling him he must stop doubting and believe.

Of note should be that Jesus has not discarded the marks of crucifixion. He retains those and looking ahead to Revelation, they are still there. It is important to remember that Jesus is fully human, as well as fully divine, and will forever bear those marks of love. Yet, his care is phenomenal as he chooses to bless Thomas personally and to show Thomas that he knew what he had said by addressing the very point Thomas had made about this need to touch the holes in Jesus' body. There is then a moment of personal intensity as Thomas, without touching Jesus, proclaims him as "My Lord and God". Thomas who had doubted becomes Thomas who declares. Yet another indication of the transformation that takes place when a person meets the risen Jesus.

The end of this passage is one of many precious verses in the Scriptures. John lets us into his own mind by telling us that he wrote the Gospel with the single purpose that people will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and have eternal life in his name. Although verse 30 records that he had been selective in what he included, verse 31 tells us it is enough. We will believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures. We will believe he is the Son of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and we will have life as promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is no separation between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. There is a beautiful continuity of what some looked forward to, others saw happening, and the rest of us benefit from as we cast our eyes back to the crucifixion and resurrection, and forward to eternal life.

ACNA Readings

Psalm 111. The writer of this Psalm also begins with praise. His desire is that his whole heart will honour God, but that it will be with the upright. That same idea as Psalm 16 that the praise of God belongs amongst fellow believers. His praise is fuelled by the great works of the Lord (v. 2) as those works bring delight to the ones who love the Lord – perhaps implying that those who do not know God cannot understand what he is doing. Verse three takes us a step further. Not only are God's works great but they are glorious and majestic with a righteousness that endures forever. Scripture often looks forward eternally, rather than limiting things to this life alone.

The Israelites were commanded to remember things that God had done. Passover, for example, was to be remembered every year and verse four reminds us of that fact. The wonders of God are remembered because he is gracious and compassionate. God may be a God of the miraculous, but he

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has compassion for those he loves, he feeds them and remembers eternally the covenant he has with his people (v. 5).

Verse six is a further reminder of God's power as the Psalmist reminds people that God had given the Israelites land that had belonged to other people, thus establishing a home for them; yet verse seven adds, that what God does is faithful, just, and that he is trustworthy. These are also themes that run through the whole of Scripture, not only that but what God does lasts forever (v. 8).

The word forever appears again in verse nine, but this time it is in the context of redemption for God's people. God has always been and always will be a redeeming God. Redemption is not a new thing, it was always the Lord's work and it all comes under his holy and awesome name, just as in Philippians 2 we are reminded that the name of Jesus is above all other names, that "at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess him Lord." This should lead to a fear of the Lord – not a crushing fear – a fear that brings wisdom, wisdom that leads his followers to have a good understanding (v. 10). The final word is, rightly, for God. The praise with which the Psalmist began, belongs to God for eternity.

About the author. The Rev Mark K. Madeley was born in 1968. He is an Anglican minister ordained into the Church of England in 1993. Having worked in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, Mark moved to Weston-super-Mare (just south of Bristol on the West Coast) in 2012 where he is currently rector of St. Nicholas with St. Barnabas. Mark also owns a travel company, MIB Travel, and since 2010, he has been operating all of the CMJ Shoreside Study Tours originating in the UK. He is passionate about people going to Israel and learning the truth according to Scripture. He is also president of Christian Friends of Magen David Adom and a vice president of Magen David Adom UK, the UK arm of the Israel ambulance service. He is validated by Durham University as a distance tutor and marks theological and Church history assignments. He is married to Caroline and has two teenage children, Rachel and Benjamin.