

De Krijtberg, April 14, 2024, 3rd Sunday of Easter.

Acts 3:13-15, 17-19, Lk. 24:35-48

Peter van Dael SJ

## THE APPEARANCE OF THE RISEN CHRIST AND THE SCRIPTURES

*Peace be with you*

The Gospel opens with the following scene somewhere in Jerusalem, in a house or in the courtyard of a house. The eleven remaining apostles – Judas had dropped out in the meantime – had gathered there. It is obvious that the conversation was about Jesus, who was gruesomely killed two days ago. They were still dismayed and adrift. Moreover, they were angry with themselves because they had abandoned Jesus: Judas had betrayed him, Peter had denied him, and all had fled (Mt. 26:56).

Now Jesus once said: *Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them* (Mt. 18:20). This turned out to be true, because suddenly Jesus had appeared in their midst. He said: *Peace be with you*. This sounded reassuring. Jesus was apparently not angry with them. This wish for peace included forgiveness. But at the same time the disciples were bewildered and afraid. Was it Jesus? Wasn't it an apparition, a ghost?

*Look at my hands and feet, do you have anything to eat?*

The story continues. Jesus tries to remove their fear and doubt by showing that it is really him: look at my hands and feet, touch me, give me something to eat. Not an apparition, but Jesus, recognizable by the signs of the wounds in his hands and feet. The same and yet different. The emphasis on the physicality of Jesus – looking, touching, eating – has to do with the Jewish way of seeing. For Greeks, the body is the dungeon of the soul. For them, death is the liberation of the soul, the soul that continues to exist without a body. But for Jews, body and soul belong together. The fact that Jesus shows himself visibly and tangibly means that he is alive, despite the fact that he has died.

The appearance of Jesus is no proof for them. Spontaneously the apostles thought they saw an apparition. Even when they had seen and touched his hands and feet, they still could not believe. That other sign of in the resurrection stories, the empty tomb, was also no proof. When Mary Magdalene found Jesus' tomb empty, she did not think of his resurrection, but of grave robbing: *They*

*have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him* (John 20:13).

### *Understanding the Scriptures*

Only a closer reading of Scripture brought faith. This applied to Peter and the other disciple, who had seen the empty tomb, but only understood from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead (John 20:9). This also applied to the two disciples at Emmaus: their hearts only started burning when the Scripture was opened to them (Lk. 24:32). This was also true for the disciples of today's Gospel reading: they did not believe until their minds had been made receptive to understanding the Scriptures (Lk. 24:45). We can therefore conclude that neither the empty tomb nor the apparitions, but only the renewed reading of Scripture can lead to faith in the Risen Lord.

What then can be read in Scripture? We read there the story of the covenant between God and his people. God commits himself in faithfulness to his people. This means a call for them to connect with God in turn. This commitment can only be made concrete by living according to the Law. That means above all: loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself (Mk. 12:30-31). But God's faithfulness was continually met with unfaithfulness. And each time God appeared willing to renew the covenant. That is the message of the prophets. That is also the message of Jesus. He fully lived up to the covenant in his own life. His life was spent in faithfulness to God, whom he called his Father, and in faithfulness to the people around him, whom he called his brothers and sisters (Mt. 12:50). Such a life cannot be destroyed, because it has eternal value in the sight of God. In other words, Jesus had to rise from the dead. His life is modeled on the *servant of the Lord*, as he appears in the book of Isaiah. We read of this servant: *Seized and condemned, he was taken away... He was given a grave among the wicked... Because of his anguish he shall see the light...* (Isa. 53:8-9.11).

### *Bearing witness*

The disciples are called to believe in Jesus, who lived the covenant between God and his people. They are also instructed to testify of Jesus to others. They receive this call and this assignment despite the fact that they had been unfaithful to Jesus. But they had experienced forgiveness, as we have seen. From that experience they proclaim that God is a forgiving God, who always enters into a new covenant with his people, who always gives them a new

chance: *This is what all nations must hear: 'Start a new life, and God will forgive your mistakes.'* You must now tell this to everyone, first of all in Jerusalem (Lk. 24:47-48). We hear in this assignment that the good news is primarily addressed to the Jews. These are addressed by Peter in the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles. But the Gospel reading also speaks of *all nations* (Lk.24:47): the good news is also intended for the Gentiles, so also for us. In a sense, we are no worse off than Jesus' direct disciples. We are at a disadvantage because we have not experienced Jesus himself, have not had an appearance of a touchable Jesus, have not seen an empty tomb. But, as we saw, apparitions and the empty tomb are not proof. The real argument are the Scriptures. This applies to Jesus' direct disciples and to us, two thousand years later.

The gospel calls us to bear witness to this Jesus, in our own time and in our own environment. The period of crowded church services is over - at least in our region - but the full churches where the St. Matthew Passion is performed, and the full squares and streets of the city through which *The Passion* passes, show that Jesus is meaningful to many. In a time like ours, when great ideas and great ideals have been pulverized, there still appears to be a need in broad circles for a figure you can admire, a figure who can inspire you. It is our assignment and calling to bring this Jesus to life where we are.