

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year C**

**Exodus 14.10-31;15.20,21 • Psalm 118.14-29 or Psalm 150 •  
Acts 5.27-32 • John 20.19-31**

**St Luke's, Chelsea**

**24 April 2022**

**Sam Hole**

Meta. The new name for the company that owns Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. Mark Zuckerberg's decision has propelled the concept of the metaverse to wide public attention – even if we're not always sure what it is. As Robert Shrimley suggested in the *Financial Times* a few months ago: 'if you want to understand the metaverse, imagine a world in which you have teenaged children. They are often in the house, but they are never really there because they are always in a world that is way more cool. Sometimes they are building another world in *Minecraft* or maybe they are just talking to each other all night. ... You can go up to see them in person, but they'd prefer it if you WhatsApped.' Horror, many of us might say. But this is indeed the world that is emerging. The younger you are, the more comfortable you are likely to be with living significant parts of your life online, and with navigating the different forms of virtual and in-person engagement with others. It's hardly surprising that the big tech companies are all seeking, in their very physical, earthly ways, to muscle in on this metaverse.

Some of the best experiences, though, happen in the flesh. And among those many we could list is surely the appearance of Jesus in the midst of the disciples, the evening of the very same day after the resurrection. The doors are locked; the disciples are trembling. They don't know whether there are people roaming the streets

looking for close associates of the mysteriously disappeared teacher from Galilee – but they don't want to run the risk. And into that setting of fear and confusion – of ongoing attempts to work out the truth of the bizarre reports from that same day's dawn – into that setting walks Jesus, with the words 'Peace be with you'.

One week later the scene repeats itself. The disciples are shut away in the room, and again in walks Jesus, and utters the same words: 'Peace be with you'. This is Thomas's moment. The questions, the hope, the doubt that has played around his mind every waking hour for the last week drops away. 'My Lord and my God!' he exclaims.

And it is in this face-to-face, hand-to-bloodied-side encounter that so much that is at the heart of our faith can be glimpsed. For this is Jesus risen and with his friends again, just as we are grateful to gather here again, to see one another. This is Jesus whose appearance in the flesh drives away fear. In similar fashion, when we gather together in all our diversity, we become familiar who were previously strangers; we encounter more fully what it is to be human; and so we discover what it is to be made in the image of God. This is Jesus who invites his friends to draw near, to touch him in all his fleshly reality, just as Christ calls us to share bread and wine in remembrance of him. That gathering in the locked room is in many ways a microcosm of the faith that is embodied in our worship together.

Our online lives, and the metaverse that it seems we will all soon be interacting through, is a grand new innovation. It will bring us new forms of communication and encounter. But it is only a step change from the ways that people have formed connections beyond the purely physical. Just think of the ancient Greek writer Pausanias, setting down his ten-volume travel guide to Greek cities for the benefit of those who would never visit those places

themselves. Or consider how medieval pilgrims who couldn't make the hazardous and arduous journey to a saint's shrine themselves found ways to bring about something of the encounter. Some left provision in their will for another to make pilgrimage on their behalf.<sup>1</sup> Small pieces of cloth might be left on the tomb, to become some sort of contact relic that could be brought home.<sup>2</sup> At Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury, you could even buy vials of liquid from a vat in which had been placed a cloth that had been used to wipe Becket's blood from the cathedral floor. The concentration of Becket's blood probably became increasingly homeopathic over the centuries: but such vials brought countless thousands more who had not visited the shrine into an encounter with Becket's faithful life.<sup>3</sup> Whether Pausanias's travel writing or these alternative forms of pilgrimage: all were, if you like, 'virtual' ways of making the journey. The metaverse is one new way of building connections around the world, even when physical contact is impossible.

And yet, if there is one thing we have learned through the last two years of zoom, it is that the physical matters. As one businessman put it to me recently, explaining why he was resuming international travel: 'There's a lot of discussions that seem intractable at 3pm that aren't over a drink at 11pm.' Our livestreaming of this very service is a wonderful innovation, a tremendous boost we hope for those who aren't able to be with us in person – and yet we know that it can't match the experience of being present with others in the same building, and as the Body of Christ sharing physically together in the Body of the Lord.

When the disciples meet Jesus in the locked room, their faith is transformed. For this event is no tale of a meeting from far away, such that one might suspect tall tales – just as if Jesus appeared

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Why can the dead do such great things?*, (Princeton University Press, 2015), p.422

<sup>2</sup> Bartlett, *Why can the dead*, p.250

<sup>3</sup> Bartlett, *Why can the dead*, though I can't find the reference.

today in the metaverse, we would worry about 'deep fakes'. Jesus's resurrection appearance are no mere apparitions. The two appearances we hear of in today's gospel are meetings in-person with the risen Jesus, bearing the same scars of his passion. And so, as we gather today, we are part of that unbroken chain of worshippers who for the last two millennia have gathered together like those disciples. By God's grace, we discover Christ in our midst. This is life in all its fullness: God among us, bringing peace where there is fear, forgiveness where there is guilt, and faith where there is doubt. This is real life. Here. Now. Together. This is resurrection life.