



14th April 2024
Acts 3.12-19
Luke 24.36-49

Hands and Feet at Easter!

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

There was a wonderful moment a few years ago in BBC's *Call the Midwife* at Sister Evangelina's funeral. This stoic, ferocious yet loving Anglican Nun cum Midwife would have no flowers – so nothing adorned her coffin. That was until, in a stroke of genius, Sister Monica Joan emerged from Nonnatus' House holding Sister Evangelina's old, dog-eared crumpled shoes. Shoes that had taken her into hundreds of homes in Poplar as she brought to each family the comfort and hope that every midwife offers a mum to be. Those shoes, which had protected the feet of such a beloved member of the East End community – these battered yet beautiful black shoes adorned her coffin to its final resting place. Her feet said so much about her love for God and the people she felt called by God to serve.

In today's gospel, still in this wonderful season of resurrection celebration, I think we see something of what an Easter Church might look like. And in the story from Acts we see what it looked like in the life of Peter and John. And here's the thing, it looks very much like the ministry of Jesus!

So I love a line in today's reading from Luke, it's evening and the day has been piled high with confusion. The Emmaus walkers had done an about turn and made the eight mile journey back to Jerusalem and now everyone, Luke says, was behind closed doors talking it through, trying to make sense of the first Resurrection Sunday of The Christian Church. And into the malaise Jesus appears and cuts through all their chatter with one request; *look at my hands, look at my feet.*

To the eleven, plus supporting cast members, folk who had lost their bearings and maybe even their identity, Jesus says *look*. Because hands and feet can say a great deal.

There is something openly honest about our hands.

Painters love hands. In Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal*, he famously paints the Father embracing his returning son with one hand that looks masculine, the other feminine.

I love shaking your hands in greeting at the door week by week – that tactile gesture of welcome, greeting, friendship and appreciation.

And although we sometimes despair of our hands looking older with thinning skin and more knobbly, even arthritic – joints – these hands of ours sort of bear our history. They have held our pens, tapped our computers, played the piano keys, held the gardening folk, the chopping knife, the steering wheel – changed the baby's nappy and caressed a loved one.

Our feet, of course, are generally because of our cold climate, less on show!

So, on that Easter Day Jesus doesn't say: look at my face. He doesn't even say: listen to my voice. Instead, he said: look at my hands and look at my feet.

Hands that still bore the imprint of the nails that hammered him onto the cross. Good Friday lingers into Easter Day.

For this is the Jesus who isn't sanitized and unrealistically beautiful, who didn't go 'round' the suffering but 'through' it.

Seeking to faithfully be an Easter Church is to be a community that continues to look at Jesus' hands and feet.

What did Peter, James, Andrew and Thaddeus and the other disciples see as they looked at Jesus' hands?

They saw the hands that had lovingly embraced lepers, spread mud on the eyelids of a blind man, broke loaves at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, poured out wine in the Upper Room and gestured with fresh emphasis as he taught new and deeper truths.

What did John, Thomas, Nathaniel, Matthew and the other disciples see as they looked at Jesus' feet?

They saw the feet of one who had walked miles to meet those on the margins as well as those who lived in fine houses, who didn't wait in a temple for an audience but met people where they were – on a hillside or by a well at noon.

As these disciples looked, they saw the hands and feet of love in action and of willing service generously given.

Now, in the reading from Acts this morning, we hear Peter preaching and he's quite fiery. This isn't Peter sitting around a courtyard fire in so much of a dither that he denies Jesus. This is the reinstated and recommissioned Peter, the passionate preacher.

Luke is probably following something of a tradition in Acts 3. In his world, like ours, people often had heroes, be they generals or senators. And their followers

would stand in the market squares of Rome or Athens and make speeches extolling the virtues of the leaders they so respected. And in a way that's exactly what Luke has Peter do here. It's a formula the hearers and readers of Acts would recognise. Peter stands in his market square, the one next to Jerusalem's temple and he extols the merits and virtues of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter's sermon employs the use of contrast and he does it rather effectively. He wants to contrast all the bitterness and cruelty of Holy Week with the kindness and compassion which was at the heart of Jesus's message and mission.

Of course, Peter must have been acutely aware that if the disciples didn't preach sermons like this one, it might very well appear that hatred and violence had won the day. That the Jesus story had, indeed, been snuffed out.

It's helpful to note here that the death of Jesus isn't described by Peter in a sacrificial, atonement sort of way. In this passage he isn't the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but the innocent victim of an unjust sentence. He was killed because his teachings of liberation and justice upset the status quo.

So, Peter says: you tried to snuff him out, but God raised Jesus up and we are witnesses to his continuing life, presence and truth. . The cross did not snuff out Jesus. And the message of resurrection is that love, light and goodness go on.

Love wins.

So, in what sense did Peter and John follow through on the Easter Sunday encounter with Jesus when they were told to look at the hands and feet of Jesus.

Peter's sermon – well that's impressive! And surely that's got to be part of what an Easter Church looks like: speaking and talking about God's love, expressed in Jesus who's cross and resurrection has a profound message that nurtures and nourishes us.

But this sermon, contrary to those who set the lectionary may have thought, I suspect shouldn't be separated from the verses that go before. That day it wasn't just the words of Peter that honoured God, it was also his actions. It's what Peter and John did with their hands and feet.

On their way to the temple to pray, they shifted their focus from a private to public faith. Suddenly this hour wasn't about liturgy but compassion. They reach out to a lame man and heal him. Luke, perhaps because he might have been a doctor, is keen on miracles. He saw them as an expression of God's peace and wholeness touching a person's life and Acts 3 this morning chronicles a transformative moment as a life that felt so crushed is now restored. This man went away walking and leaping and praising God.

On this, the third Sunday of Easter, we stand, as it were in temple square listening to a passionate sermon. Peter laments that so many wanted the life of Jesus to be snuffed out, yet he proclaims resurrection and insists that the life of Jesus goes on. And the healing of the lame man just moments before he started preaching, is an example of that life still pulsating with the goodness of God. And days like this happen because Peter and John stood in the room on Easter evening with the eleven, looking at the hands and feet of Jesus. And now, they use their hands and feet to live like Jesus.

So – looking at Jesus' feet and hands became a moment of recommissioning for all in that room that first Easter evening.

500 years ago in Spain, a Carmelite nun, Teresa, wrote a prayer that might have found its beginning in today's gospel: You have probably heard it said or sung many times:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*

What will our hands and feet do for God this week?

Let me close. The other month, like most months, some of us went along to a residential home to take a service. After the service we usually go round the circle and chat to the residents.

On that day, I spoke to a lady who told me of the needlework she has done for her church. She looked at me and said: I don't know, it felt to me, at the time, as if every stitch was an act of worship.

They were such beautiful, and I have to say, unexpected words. And I came away from the care home feeling that I had received far more than I had given. I came away with that picture of the lady using her hands for God – what did she say, as *if every stitch was an act of worship*.

May we live our lives this week in such a spirit, so that our hands and feet are used in the service of our resurrected Lord. Amen.