**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

The Gospel for the third Sunday of Easter is part of the Emmaus story, when two disciples recognised Jesus as he broke bread in their house in the village of Emmaus. Right up until he broke the bread, they had taken Jesus for a stranger. He had joined them for their seven mile yomp from Jerusalem on the evening of the day we now call Easter Sunday.

These are such human exchanges – you can imagine Jesus having a bit of a smile to himself, hearing them talk and knowing what he was about to reveal to them. He drew out from them how they felt that their hopes had been completely destroyed. He heard how they were aware that some women from their group had found the tomb empty. Note, incidentally, how often it is that women have the key exchanges with Jesus – how often they play lead roles as disciples. *And then tell me the Bible says nothing about the role of women as leaders in the church…*

But still they had not twigged. They may have been amazed and dumbfounded by the tale the women brought, but it did not alter their sense of loss. Eventually Jesus relents and says ‘how foolish you are, and how slow of heart’. He interprets the scriptures for them, and their hearts, we are told, burned within them. But still they did not recognise Jesus for who he was.

They asked him to stay with them when they reached Emmaus; in the words of the hymn: Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. And, finally, finally, when he broke the bread, they knew him… and everything changed. I pray with the choir before we begin this 9.45 service, and most often what I pray is: As watchmen look for the morning, so do we look for you, O Christ; come with the dawning of the day, make yourself known in the breaking of the bread….

Jesus vanished at this point in the story, yet he left behind him people who were transformed. They returned to Jerusalem, walking again the seven miles, but this time, with hope and joy in their hearts. They went and found the eleven, who greeted them with the same words we use today: He is risen indeed, and they exchanged stories about the appearance of Jesus to Simon and on the Emmaus road.

And (quote)… “While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them”. Our Gospel today begins with the second half of that sentence “Jesus himself stood among them”, but we need to place it all in context: this is the final piece of the Emmaus story.

There, in that room, were three people who had already met the risen Jesus – Simon Peter and Clopas and his companion; plus several women who had seen a vision of angels at the empty tomb. For everyone else, this was their first encounter with the risen Christ. They may have used words: he is risen indeed, but there was nonetheless fear and disbelief. Jesus had to invite them to touch him, and demonstrate, by real physical consumption of food, that he was not a ghost. And then he unpacked the scriptures again, as he had done on the road to Emmaus, all the way back to the story of Moses. And after that he told them the task for which he had been schooling them: repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You, he said, are witnesses of these things. That’s important.

And that, apart from three more verses, is the end of Luke’s gospel, although then, of course, he wrote a sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, in which he told the story of how the early church grew and developed. That story may end - as far as St Paul is concerned - in Rome; but the task they started, of course, continues ad infinitum – to the end, to the point at which we will all be gathered to God in the end times.

So what does it actually mean when Jesus says to us: you are my witness? After all, none of us was there in that room when Jesus came among them; though neither, remember, was Luke. And yet Luke was an effective and authentic witness. He wrote down the story as he had received it, and the way that he told it shows exactly how he understood it. And there is a point in the Acts of the Apostles, when Luke stopped describing what went on in terms of he did or she did, and started writing we did instead. He became embroiled in the story and owned it for himself.

In that same way, our witness has to be equally authentic; real and rooted in our own lives. The word ‘witness’ conjures up a legal situation, but it doesn’t take any legal training to understand that you wouldn’t call someone as a witness if they hadn’t actually seen whatever it was that is being examined.

There is no credibility at all in telling the jury that you weren’t actually there, but this is what you believe had happened. Nothing authentic about that, nothing that the judge would find even slightly convincing. We want someone who has actually seen something, who knows something, who’s heard something, who was there, for whom the experience was real and actual.

As we’ve gathered today, the eleven in the Upper Room had certainly heard the story of the resurrection, but took some persuading when Jesus actually came back among them.

Likewise, our job as witnesses to Christ is to reflect on where and how we have - as individual members of God’s family - encountered the risen Jesus, and how we too can best share that story with authenticity. The book of the Acts of the Apostles is not complete until we have.

**Amen**