

Faith to action.

Luke's account isn't an eye-witness account of what happened (If we go back to the beginning of Luke's gospel we read in verses 3 and 4 from chapter 1, "I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account ... so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.") but it is well informed. In the lead up to today's reading, we have his account of the appearance of Jesus to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus, a village about ten kilometres from Jerusalem. Luke tells us one of them was Cleopas, but doesn't name the other. They were Jesus' followers, but they weren't in the key group, who were now referred to as the Eleven. And while Cleopas and his companion were walking along, Jesus joined them, but they didn't recognise him.

Jesus asked the two what they were talking about, and they described to him, in detail, the events of the last few days... "the things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. [...] some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, [...] they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive." (24:19-23)

Despite telling him all these things – clearly, it was a lengthy conversation – they didn't recognise Jesus: In fact, it wasn't until after they'd invited this apparent stranger to stay with them, and Jesus had broken bread for them, that they'd recognised him.

And then they'd rushed back to Jerusalem – in the middle of the night – and found the eleven, to find them already discussing Jesus' resurrection, Cleopas and his friend joined in and they told the other disciples what had happened on the road.

You can imagine the excitement – the rush of sharing details. The speculation about what this meant. The questions for those who had seen the risen Jesus.

And then Luke tells us "While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."" (24:36).

I can imagine things suddenly going very quiet. I'm not surprised that they were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. (24:37).

It was all very well to theorise and speculate about Jesus' resurrection – and probably doubt as well – but when they were confronted with Jesus, standing there in their midst, they would have been startled and terrified, and the most plausible explanation was probably that it was a ghost – an apparition.

But Jesus knew them. And he understood them. And he cared for them. And so he reassured them: "He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet." (24:38-40)

We make so much of Thomas's doubt that we read about in John's gospel, and Thomas saying "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25), and sure enough when Jesus appeared to him, and offered him his hands and his side, Thomas recognised Jesus as ""My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Although Thomas has become famous as 'Doubting Thomas', Thomas needed no more proof than the other disciples had already received – John records that when Jesus initially appeared to the gathered disciples, he said "Peace be with you" and showed them his hands and his side (John 20:19-20), just like Luke records here: Jesus appears, says "Peace be with you" and shows them his hands and his feet.

And even then, they were still disbelieving and wondering – but now, Luke notes that they're not terrified anymore... now they're joyful. Jesus then does something quite mundane: he says to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" and so they gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it.

How terribly normal. Maybe not what you'd expect a victorious, risen saviour to do... but what you'd expect a person – a real person – to do. This was no ghost, no apparition, no spirit, but this was Jesus – their leader, their teacher and their friend, come back to life. He was flesh and blood.

And they believed. And they celebrated.

Jesus, having established that it really is him, that he is not a ghost, reminds them of what he'd already told them – verse 44, He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

They'd heard it before, but he reminds them now: All of history – the law, the prophets and the psalms, was – is – fulfilled in him.

The resurrection is more than simply Jesus coming back from the dead, as amazing as that is. This is God's plan for the redemption of the world – the restoration of the world to the way it should be – being enacted.

Paul later says that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18), so his resurrection points to the resurrection of all who follow him. It points to our resurrection.

But not only did Jesus tell them that all these things had been fulfilled, he helped them understand them. Verse 45 says "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."

There's a difference between knowing things and understanding them. The disciples had heard Jesus tell them what would happen to him several times over during his ministry, but they hadn't understood.

And, if you think about it, those two followers on the road to Emmaus knew all the facts about what had happened to Jesus, all the way to knowing about the eye-witness accounts

of his resurrection. And yet, they didn't understand. They didn't 'get it'. Even with Jesus walking along beside them, the idea that Jesus had actually risen was just that bit too much, and they didn't recognise him.

And I think we can do something similar. We can focus on learning things or knowing things instead of understanding them. Even going back to the old days of Sunday School memory verses, where you would learn a bible verse by rote, and if you could repeat it accurately next week you'd get a reward or a point toward an annual total. And having repeated the verse, you'd move on to the next one.

Now, that's not a bad thing to do. But we need to do more with scripture than simply remembering it. We need to understand it. We need to take it into our hearts, and have it change our hearts – and change our lives. Paul wrote to Timothy that “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16-17)

Sometimes people stop at “All scripture is inspired by God”, but Paul is clear that it is inspired by God so that it is useful for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, and so that we, who belong to God, may be equipped to do good work.

So as we open the bible – as a church, as a small group or as individuals – we need to look beyond what the scriptures say, to what the scriptures mean. Of course, we can't leap to what the scriptures mean, if we don't comprehend what they say.

Now, we probably won't understand it all overnight. We probably won't understand it all in our lifetimes, but that's okay: We do not need to have all the answers in order to be Christians – to be followers of Jesus. But when we turn to Jesus, when we put our faith in him, we open our hearts to him, and he will help us to know him better and understand his teaching more. We will begin to know him better and love him more. And we will recognise him in our lives and the lives of others.

Jesus then effectively recaps what has happened: In verse 46 and he said to them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.”

That's what we believe as Christians. Jesus' mission was to suffer and die and rise from the dead. That's what we understand. That's the message of the cross that Paul wrote to the Corinthians about that we looked at a few weeks ago...“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Cor 1:18)

But Jesus doesn't stop there, he goes on explain that repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (24:47)

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached. That's Jesus' emphasis here. He doesn't tell his followers to go and do good deeds. He doesn't even tell them to preach – to proclaim – the good news of his death and resurrection. Instead, Jesus tells them that repentance and forgiveness are to be proclaimed.

To repent is to turn to God. To turn away from the things of the world, and put God first. It's a big change. It's not enough to believe, not enough to even understand, but people – we – need to change.

Our faith is not simply knowing things. It's not simply understanding what things mean. Our faith leads to us being changed. Seeing what Jesus did for us, and responding to it. Taking action. Doing our part – whatever that may be – in proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name to all the nations.

We should note that repentance and forgiveness go together. Often people are quite happy to proclaim repentance ("Stop doing what's wrong!"), but not so happy about the forgiveness part ("I forgive you for what you've done wrong."). We need to, as God's people, proclaim both.

Jesus told the disciples to do that, "beginning at Jerusalem". Why beginning at Jerusalem? Well, that was the centre of Jewish life and the Jewish people were God's chosen people. So yes, it would make sense to begin in Jerusalem. But I think there's another, simpler explanation as well: because that's where they were. The disciples were in Jerusalem, so that's where they would start.

So where do we start? I don't think that it's Jerusalem. I think we start wherever we are. Here we are as the Uniting Church in St Ives, so it makes sense to proclaim repentance and forgiveness here. I went through the St Ives Uniting directory, and counted up, and found that just under half our members live in St Ives – mostly they're in surrounding suburbs. But it means that we have a broader geographic reach than simply the suburb our church building is in. And the patterns of our lives bring us into contact with people in many different places and situations.

As I say, I think we need to start where we are.... although we do need to remember Jesus' instruction to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations.

And finally, in our gospel reading today, Jesus reminds us that "You are witnesses of these things." (24:48). You are the witnesses, he said, you're the ones. Not people who are better trained or equipped. Not people who are braver or smarter or have fewer responsibilities. But you. Your faith must lead to action.

It's the same with us. It's now our job to be witnesses to Jesus. Our faith has to lead to our action. We can't wait for others to take action for us.

And as we look back over the history of the church, we can see that faith has led to action time and time again. People have contributed so much, and contributed in unexpected ways. People have come to faith simply because they've been greeted with a friendly smile. People have benefited from our charity. People have been encouraged because of the fellowship of faithful Christians.

And we take heart that God is in control. Ultimately, God has a plan, and it is our privilege to be part of that plan, to respond in faith to what God has done for us in Jesus.

Let us all open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, so that our faith will lead us to action.

To the glory of God.

Amen.