

Revelations of the Risen Christ



Easter Study Group Material:
Penarth Churches

Cytun

Eglwysi Ynghyd
Yng Nghymru

Churches together
In Wales

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INTRODUCTION

The church of Jesus Christ is the family of God. In this loving community there is a true commitment to Jesus Christ and to each other. Jesus was inclusive in his welcoming attitudes to everyone and small groups facilitate opportunities in which everyone should feel at home in our local fellowship. (See Acts 2:44-46 and Acts 4:34) Therefore all of our Easter Groups should be welcoming to each other and should be creative in finding ways of allowing every member to share their concerns and to experience the care of a loving community.

The recent development of “Cell” Church and “Cell” Groups has been emphasising the importance of the four “W’s” of which welcome or fellowship is but one aspect of our life together

Welcome: where the group exercises love to one another and where there is real caring and sharing.

Worship: where the group seek to encounter God through prayer, praise and silence.

Word: where the group seeks to understand and apply God’s word in their everyday lives.

Witness: where the whole group looks outward in practical ways.

Every disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ should devote themselves to such a group and to such principles as outlined here. These studies have been organised to help us develop these four areas together.

A NOTE FOR THOSE FACILITATING THE GROUP

One of the most important roles of the small group facilitator is to ensure that the group members have received the study material in plenty of time to prepare adequately for the meeting. If members have not read the material before hand allow time for everyone to do so. Then summarise the subject briefly.

1. What kind of group Bible study is BEST?

The best discussion follows when the members each prepare privately and then discuss their findings together. What we want to avoid is doing people’s thinking for them when they could be doing it for themselves. Few mountaineers enjoy being carried to the top of a mountain, but most appreciate a guide.

2. What a group Bible study should NOT be:

a) It is not a lecture.

It is quite unnecessary for the group Leader to give a lecture, especially if the members have prepared beforehand.

b) It is not a long conversation.

Another way of leading degenerates into merely having a long dialogue. The leader asks one member a question, and comments on the reply. The member then tries to justify himself or herself. Avoid the long conversation: it is only appropriate when no more than two people are present.

c) It is not a series of conversations.

If the leader directs questions to specific individuals, not only may they be embarrassed if they fail to have relevant answers but the whole group will become more and more leader-dependent and will increasingly become a teacher conducting a series of conversations.

The study therefore should be a GROUP DISCUSSION.

3. Group discussions

In practice the Leader asks a question while looking around the group to show that anyone is welcome to answer. Somebody does.

The leader then asks: "What did others find?" or "What facts did someone else discover?" and look around the group for anyone else who wants to catch his or her eye but doesn't like to speak without doing so.

Then another member contributes and so on. To begin with, the members will give their replies looking at the leader, but soon, if the leader persists patiently with suitable guiding questions, the members reply to the group instead of the leader: the discussion has begun.

Instead of remaining Leader-centred, it must become group-centred.

Although the leader is no longer the focus of the group, he or she needs to guide the group to see that the Bible is their focus and the Holy Spirit their teacher.

This is the kind of purposeful group Bible discussion which is most profitable: each member contributing to the group, everyone, including the leader, learning from each other; the Bible and the Lord are at the centre, and the leader quietly acting as facilitator.

WEEK ONE
Revelations to Mary John 20:1-20
by Peter Cox — All Saints

For the host:

For this session you will need a recording of the Hallelujah Chorus, something to play it on, a pebble or small stone for every group member. A cross and a green cloth.

Welcome: *An Icebreaker*

The best moment of your life...Some best moments taken at random!

‘The day I met my now husband in high school 30 years ago, the day we got engaged, the day we got married and the day we had our daughter.’

‘My last great moment is when my mother was invited to go to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen at a garden party, the amazing sense of pride that I felt for her was amazing, it's a great honour for our family and for my mother.’

‘The best moment in my life was when my great-grandmother died because all her suffering vanished.’

Ask the group to share best moments.

Worship:

Stand and listen to the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ from Handel’s Messiah. Use the green cloth to cover the centre of the table.

On central table have an **empty** Cross

Light a Candle and sit in quiet; remember the best moments in life and turn them into prayer.

Put the candle out: reflect on your worst moments; reach back into the sadness and then listen to the story.

Each member of the group place a pebble around the cross. Stones are laid like flowers on graves in Jerusalem.

In your mind and heart, Go with Mary to the grave of Jesus.

Word:

Read the Gospel — John 20:1-20

Getting behind the text:



A picture of the garden tomb

Look up John 19:38-42. What do you think Joseph and Nicodemus were trying to do for Jesus when they asked Pilate for his body?

What was Mary going to do?

How does this story relate to the story at the beginning of John 12?

What was Mary's mood as she approached the grave?

Mary concludes from the evidence of the empty tomb that something worse has happened; do the members of the group identify when such expectations?

What does the group make of Mary's failure to recognise Jesus in the garden?

Disclosure comes when Jesus speaks her name. How important is the idea that God knows each of us by name?

Jesus transforms Mary's sorrow into joy; how do you think Mary would have expressed this to Jesus, on her way home and to her friends?

What can we learn from this?

Jesus tells Mary 'Do not cling to me.' Let the group think about this question for a moment and then invite them to share their reflections.

What command does Jesus give to Mary?

Witness:

Perspectives: Basic question:

What does this passage reveal about the Risen Christ?

What does this story reveal about our relationship with God?

What does this story reveal about our Mission?

What does the story reveal about Worship?

What does the story reveal about standing with people in their grief?

How can we use the story to help people suffering 'worst case scenarios'?

Digging Deeper:

If you are puzzled or perplexed by anything in this study then dig deeper! Ask your pastor, priest, minister or elder. Read a commentary. Look at the way the story has been represented in films or in art.

WEEK TWO
Revelations on the Emmaus Road
by Juliet Lloyd — Stanwell Road
Luke 24:13-35

Welcome: *An Icebreaker:*

Explain that the purpose of the game is to introduce ourselves but also to take note of our neighbours. First time around the group, each person should simply say, “Hello, my name is.....” Go around the circle backwards to see if each can greet the next person correctly.

When a circuit has been completed, explain that the second time around, each one must say their name again and one piece of information about themselves. It could be anything from, “I’m Roger and I’m a sky-diver,” or “I’m Mavis and I love chocolate”, to “I’m Steve and I’ve just moved back to Penarth.” Ask the group to remember as many as they can, but particularly those either side of them.

When the circuit is complete, starting at any random point, a member of the group must turn to the person to their right and say, “Hello, it’s nice to meet someone who,”, filling in the appropriate text, or addressing them otherwise but using their given information.

Introduction:

We live in a rapidly changing and apparently chaotic world. Each of us at one time or another will have had our expectations challenged. Things have not worked out as they should have done (we believe). Think back to such an incident in your life – what do you think are the chief emotional or spiritual characteristics that make it hard to persevere in such a situation? Without reference to the incident itself, name the characteristics as a group.

Today we will be considering two disciples who were experiencing just those feelings.

Worship:

Lord, we come to you with Jesus,
whose love, compassion and understanding
give us hope and assurance of your acceptance.
we come with our sin and shame;
we come bringing those things that continually defeat us
and we come with the broken hopes and dreams that still bring us
down.
We come to you as we are, but we have come with Jesus who is
our friend,
and we come to worship. Amen

Sing: 'God of Grace', Mission Praise 833

Word:

CRISIS: Cleopas and his companion, two of the Lord's close disciples, though not of the remaining eleven, were probably travelling home from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They and a number of women had shared life closely with Jesus and the other disciples over the previous months and had clearly still been with them since Jesus death. (Luke 24:9)

How would you describe their mood now? (see v.13-24) (Note, for example, the place we find them, their expressions, their depth of focus). Was it understandable and if so, why?

Was it predictable? Matt 26:31

The phrase in v.21 sums it up very well: "... but we had hoped ...", and now they have *lost hope*. But what had they been hoping for? They desired the promised deliverance for Israel as they read in the Prophets – a time when the true Kingdom would be restored, all their enemies would be overcome and prosperity, peace and justice would return to the land. See Jeremiah 23:5-8, Isaiah 40:9-10; 52:9; Zechariah 9:9-12 (This last one must have particularly resonated.) Surely this meant the overthrow of the Romans who oppressed them. Surely this also meant the universal recognition of the True King:

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", as Peter had rightly discerned.

But no, that was not how it happened.

Dissonance – when what you experience does not match what you perceive *ought to be* – and it leads to discord, discomfort, disappointment and even, at times, to a complete loss of hope. The disciples may have been withdrawing from the close relationship with the ministry or practices they had known before – what was the point? Their focus was downcast, inward-looking and hopeless.

Re-Reflection: When our own or others' perception of situations from outward appearances seem contrary to our expectations, what effect does it have practically?

How might this help us better understand ourselves or the mind-set of others we know?

CONVERSATION: At this point, Jesus comes alongside the travellers, although the text says they are 'kept' from recognizing him. We are not told whether this is a 'Divine' action to allow what is to follow (i.e. Jesus' explanation of the scriptures) to proceed naturally, or a 'blindness' caused by their feeling of hopelessness and inability to accept or believe that which they have been told. Matt 16:21; 26:32; John 10:14,18; Luke 24:23-24. We do know that it is difficult to see God working in ways that don't fit the patterns we are used to. Witness Pharisee Saul's 'blindness' to 'The Way' of redemption, in Acts 9:1-8, 17-18; or Peter's reluctance to accept the words of his vision, in Acts 10:9-15.

If we are used to seeing victory achieved by the wielding of power and authority, then brokenness is confusing. When we see the cruel or oppressive apparently triumphing, that is distressing. We can see no way that God can take a direct walk into the path of pain and suffering and from it bring life from death, freedom from bondage, peace from warfare or light in darkness.

Yet Jesus walks beside them and just lets them tell their story. They are amazed that he doesn't know: "Are you only a visitor ... a tourist passing through?!" ...but it opens the way for them to share their disappointment ... and for him to answer their questions.

Walking *alongside* someone is probably the easiest place from which to share deep cares. It may take time but it is safe and also equalizing – you are both travellers on the journey.

Reflection: Do you need to let Jesus ‘walk beside you’ now by simply expressing honestly the pain and confusion you feel? Is there someone you need to walk alongside?

How does he address their confusion? From their experiences? From the testimony of their friends? Matt 24:26-27.

He concentrates on the scriptures that were the staple of their faith. He showed them how God revealed his rescue plan through the generations: e.g. Numbers 21:9; Deut 18:15; Isaiah 9:6; 40:11; 53; Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-16, 23-24.

Countless times, God’s people are reminded to rehearse, not the troubling situations that they find themselves in, but the way God has rescued and led his people in the past – to remember that his goodness and loving kindness do not fail. Deut 11:19; Heb 10:25

COMMUNION: Amazingly, they still don’t recognize him, but arriving at their destination, companionship or perhaps Near Eastern hospitality bring about an invitation for him to join them for a meal and a bed for the night. It is a familiar scene gathered around a meal table, as a guest is asked to ‘do the honours’ of giving thanks for the meal. Is it intentional, I wonder, that Luke phrases his description of the moment so closely to the description of two other significant meals, the Last Supper (22:19) and the feeding of the five thousand (9:16)? Whether these two disciples were there at the previous occasions or only, like Luke’s later readers (and us!) it is only by hearing the story, they were invited to make the connection – and they clearly did!

Here was the Lord Jesus himself – it was as he had said, he was alive! What might they have understood from the elements of (i) blessing (ii) breaking (iii) giving of the bread that particularly linked to what they had just heard?

In that moment they were aware both of his living presence with them but also then of his absence, and yet now it did not cause them grief. Now their journey, seen in retrospect, has taken on a different light. (v.32) Now, even the absence is seen in a different light, as awaiting reunion and not desertion. John 14:3-4, 16-18, 25-27.

CHANGED PERSPECTIVE: It might have been late but these disciples didn't tuck in for the night - they headed straight back for their compatriots in Jerusalem. Their whole perspective had changed: now they saw the events as within God's foreknowledge and part of his rescue plan, and not just the sad story of a prophet or great teacher who 'died tragically young' (as the Millennium Dome exhibit suggested!). He was not overcome by Death but had overcome the final enemy and was alive! They had news to tell. And as they gather with the rest of the disciples to share their news ... they are met with the news from others who have similarly experienced the risen Christ ... and in the moment, Christ is there in their midst. Read v.32 – 36. Can you feel the excitement?

Discuss: Is it possible that in sharing our own experience of meeting Christ in our dark or confusing places, we encourage similar responses from others? So can we experience Christ in our love, mutual care and fellowship ('communion') as believers? Matt 18:20

Witness:

Today: share and pray with a 'group-neighbour' what concerns you now.

This week: be open to all those you meet to be willing to 'walk alongside' as the opportunity arises and listen deeply. Be willing to share those moments when, on reflection, you have been aware of God's hand and presence. Be an encourager.

WEEK THREE
Revelations in the upper room
by Richard Griffiths — Church in Wales
Luke 24:36-49 and John 20:19-23.

Welcome:

Prepare the room beforehand, to make it, if possible, like the Upper Room (preferably, a table in the middle). Two readers should have been chosen beforehand. After the members of the group have been welcomed with the words 'Peace be with you' (the customary Jewish greeting, the equivalent of the present-day 'Shalom'), all sit in silence for a while, thinking yourselves into the situation of the terrified disciples as they sat there behind locked doors. Imagine the effect of the appearance of the risen Christ among you. Then, on a silent sign from the leader, the two readers read the chosen passages.

Worship:

Hymn: 'Breathe on me, Breath of God.'

Prayer: 'O Lord, open our hearts so that we may feel the breath of your Spirit. Unclench our hands, so that we may reach out to one another, and touch and be healed. Open our lips, so that we may drink in the delight and wonder of life. Open our eyes, so that we may see Christ in friend and stranger. Breathe your Spirit into us, and touch our lives with the life of Christ. Amen.'

Word:

Have you noticed that these two descriptions of Jesus' appearance to his disciples in the upper room are quite different from each other? They are in no way contradictory, however. It is as though each of the Evangelists has chosen, from the things that happened, those details which were in accord with his own concerns. Luke stresses the teaching which Jesus gave to his disciples; and John stresses the gift of the Spirit which he gave to them. Both lay emphasis on the future mission that is being entrusted to them.

Luke: the enlightenment of the disciples.

The writers of the Gospels are agreed that the disciples were full of fear at the events leading up to the Crucifixion. Most of them fled, and Peter even denied his Lord, because of his fear. Even after the Resurrection, these fears continued, because, as St Mark tells us, they would not believe those who told them that they had seen the risen Christ. Here, in the upper room, those fears are still uppermost in their minds. They meet behind locked doors. When Jesus appears, they cannot believe that this is the risen Lord. Instead, they feel he must be 'a ghost', an evil being coming to them in the semblance of Jesus. 'They were startled and terrified'. Jesus, to prove his reality, tells them to touch his wounds: 'for a ghost does not have flesh and bones'. He also, in a very banal but realistic action, asks for food, and eats a piece of broiled fish. All this, in order to prove to them the reality of the Resurrection.

Why is all this needed, in order to prove to them the reality of the Resurrection? It is clear that they have understood little of what has been going on, over the last few days, despite the fact that Jesus, at various times in his life, had tried to explain it to them. St John tells us that 'as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead' (John 20:9). They needed to be taught what it is all about.

In all the descriptions that Luke gives of Jesus' appearances to the disciples, we find Jesus filling this gap by teaching his disciples, 'opening their minds to understand the scriptures'. Here, as on the road to Emmaus, he does just that, saying 'Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Here, however, he looks into the future as well: 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem'. And they are to have a role in these future events: 'You are witnesses of all this.'

From now on the disciples were to be transformed, by these teachings and by the Holy Spirit. From a fearful rabble they were to be-

come the fearless preachers of the Word whom Luke depicts to us in the Acts of the Apostles; and from ignorant countrymen they were to become eloquent 'witnesses' to Christ's message. Peter's sermon at Pentecost is the first example of this; but perhaps it is with Philip's exposition to the Ethiopian eunuch of the meaning of scripture (Acts 8: 30-36) that we see most clearly how the words of Jesus, between the Resurrection and the Ascension, were the firm basis for the future teachings of the disciples.

John: The gift of the Spirit

In John's account, the first thing that Jesus says, after his greeting, is: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you', showing, from the start, the importance of the mission he is now entrusting to them. He then proceeds to give them the gift of the Holy Spirit, which will aid them in this task.

There is a strong difference between this description and the events of Pentecost as described in Acts. Where the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was to be a violent experience, with 'a sound like a rushing mighty wind', and tongues of fire resting on each of them, this is a calm and peaceful process. I like to think that these two descriptions exemplify the diverse ways in which the Spirit touches people: for some, it can be a sudden and violent experience, which comes at them, as it were, from outside; for others, it can be a gradual inner working within them, which can come to govern their actions over a period of time.

This giving of the Spirit takes place in a very significant way. Jesus breathes on them. At the creation of the world, God created man 'from the dust of the ground'. Man was, however, incomplete and lifeless until God had breathed life into him: 'He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.' Man is, however, after all these years, still incomplete, spiritually lifeless, and can only be given spiritual life by God, in the person of Jesus, breathing it into him, as a kind of parallel to the Creation story. 'As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.'

God has thus given us an enormous gift. But is it an unconditional gift? When God breathed life into the first man, that man's lungs had to work in order to make proper use of that breath, and to stay alive. We, though breathing has become second nature to us, a kind of automatic process, still have to rely on our lungs in order to live. What about our spiritual lungs? They are not trained, like our material lungs, to function without our having to concentrate on them. We need to be specially aware, at all times, as we breathe the Spirit.

In other words, when God stretches out his hand to us, it is a 'helping hand' by which we can raise ourselves up above our humanity. For his grace to work, we have to stretch out our hand to meet God's, and accept that grace.

Jesus ends by making it clear that the Spirit has been given in order that the disciples should make use of it in their mission. 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'. As in Luke's version, the disciples are being told to go out and continue Christ's mission in the world.

Witness:

Questions for discussion:

What form has your experience of the Spirit taken? Are your spiritual lungs working as they should?

What do you believe to be the role of the scriptures, and of teaching, in our mission?

What do you believe to be our mission, if we are to continue the work of the disciples and of Jesus?

WEEK FOUR
Revelations by the Sea of Tiberius
by Ann Boot — Society of Friends
John 21:1-25

Theme: 'Doing'

Welcome:

Discuss what these logos mean to you.

What are your expectations when you see them?

Describe or draw a single logo that you could design to sum up what you are and do in your life.



Worship

Read Advice and Query 28 from 'Quaker Faith and Practice':
'Every stage of our lives offers fresh opportunities. Responding to divine guidance, try to discern the right time to undertake or relinquish responsibilities without undue pride or guilt. Attend to what love requires of you, which may not be great busyness.'

With the words as a starting point, use a period of silent worship to ask how our own 'doing' serves God.

Word:

Read John 21:1 -25.

The first words in the passage that have particular significance for me are:

- 'Feed my lambs'
- 'Shepherd my sheep'
- Feed my sheep

Jesus asked Simon Peter three times if he loved him and each time he said he did. I believe that Jesus' replies to Simon Peter –

– and each of us – are words that urge us to extend that love through our own action.

The order of the three phrases is significant because we are being asked to start with lambs before moving onto sheep. We are not being asked to jump in the deep end or to build great structures as it were, rather to start with the foundations. Nor are we being tasked with something that is just too difficult for us, we are being asked to start with tools we already have – an experience of love.

‘Lambs’ are baby sheep – a metaphor for the child in us. Young children have basic needs that only adults can meet – such as food, clothing and shelter – in other words, loving care. Adults all have needs from time to time too – maybe feelings of loneliness or anger, maybe a need to share a personal achievement or creativity. We ‘feed’ others when we are interested in them, when we listen with ears and eyes, if you like, when we act in a loving way.

In the context of Jesus’ words, I think of the word ‘sheep’ as signifying a group, rather than an individual, as in ‘lamb’. A shepherd makes sure that the flock is well looked after, takes an overview and looks to the bigger picture. The human flock is subject to many injustices – manmade inequalities. Jesus is asking us to be aware of these, to think beyond ourselves, to love everyone.

None of us can right all the wrongs in the world, but each of us can take action. We can show love - ‘feed’ the flock – not only directly, but also by upholding those who are suffering injustices and those who are working to change them.

However, it’s not always easy to love others – especially those we don’t know, those who behave in a way that we wouldn’t, those whose beliefs differ from ours, those who reject us. Towards the end of the passage, Jesus is reminding us that we should not be concerned with outcomes, or the lack of them. We serve, rather than direct.

In pairs, or triplets, share with each other ways in which our own personal ‘doing’ might relate to Jesus’ words.

Witness:

Read Advice and Query 27 from 'Quaker Faith and Practice':

'Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? Let your life speak. When decisions have to be made, are you ready to join with others in seeking clearness, asking for God's guidance and offering counsel to one another?'

How might we, as Christians from different backgrounds, come together to use our individual and group 'doing' to serve God and our community?

WEEK FIVE
Revelations to Thomas
by Roger Grafton — Tabernacle
John 20:24-31

Welcome:

Have you ever played the word association game where someone calls out a word, and you have to respond immediately, without giving it too much thought with the first word that comes into you head?

The person leading might say “black” to which you might respond “White”. “Salt – Pepper”; “High – Low”. If you have never done this exercise, don't worry – you are going to get a chance to do it now! If you are leading the Bible Study, read out the list of words below, and ask people either to all call out together the first word that pops into their head, or else get them to write it down quickly – maybe on the back page of the study booklet.

The following list is drawn from much longer lists sometimes used by psychologists in an exercise to try and find out about how we are feeling about life and yourself.

For example, in question 6, in response to the word “Head” you might reply, “toe”, “lice”, “hunter”, “heart”, “line”, depending on whether you are an optimist or a pessimist, had a good day or a bad day, or are hopeful or fearful at the moment.

I'm sure your list of responses would tell a trained person a lot about you!

If you are not leading this study, then close this study book now!

1. Black	11. Pure
2. Hot	12. Christian
3. Fish	13. Small
4. Free	14. Angels
5. Fast	15. Rain
6. Head	16. Fear
7. Life	17. Rain
8. Happiness	18. Sea
9. Full	19. Love
10. Clean	20. Faith

The group can re-open their books now.

How many of you in answer to question 20 answered “doubt”? Do you see faith and doubt as opposite, or part of the same thing? In our study today we are going to look at the story of a character who has become known as “doubting Thomas”.

However, as we shall see, faith and doubt are not the antithesis of each other, but part of the same thing. By the end of the study we shall see that the opposite of faith is not doubt – the opposite of faith is certainty, whilst faith means continuing to trust in God and his Word, even when from a human perspective there might be doubt.

Worship:

The Bible says that Jesus came that we might have “life in all its fullness”. Ask each person to write down the best thing that happened to them this week. Keep this for a moment – we will use it in a minute. Next, read the following words from Psalms 136 and 107. You could split the group into two halves with one half saying the words in light print together out loud, and the other half reading the bold print. Alternatively, one person could read the first half of each line, and the rest of the group respond with the words in bold.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of gods;
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the Lord of lords;
His love endures forever.
to him who alone does great wonders;
His love endures forever.
who by his understanding made the heavens;
His love endures forever.
who spread out the earth upon the waters;
His love endures forever.
who made the great lights;
His love endures forever.
the sun to govern the day;
His love endures forever.
the moon and stars to govern the night;
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
And let the redeemed of the LORD say so;
his love endures forever.

Now, go around the group with each person saying: “**I give thanks to the Lord that this week...**” followed by what they have written down as the best thing that happened to them this week.

Word:

Read John 20:24-31 out loud. Either ask one person to read the passage right through, or else divide it up into smaller sections for several people to read aloud.

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed". ³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Verse 25:

- Is Thomas's reaction unreasonable?
- Would it be more reasonable that he trust his own experience or the testimony of his friends?
- Why do you think he might have doubted the testimony of the other disciples? Do you think that Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial might have affected Thomas' trust in the group?

Personal reflection: How do you react when another Christian tells you about something miraculous or incredible that has happened? If, for example, you heard someone say they had been healed by God in response to prayer, would you trust their testimony, or be sceptical?

Verse 26

- What are Jesus' first words to the group of disciples when he appears to them in this passage? Why do you think he uses this greeting
- "Peace be with you", was a normal Hebrew greeting when meeting someone, but Jesus may have had a special reason for saying these words. When he had met the disciples the week before (John 29:19-23) he had used the same greeting. It is possible that following their behaviour on Good Friday, the disciples had been fearful of receiving a rebuke from Jesus, but instead he calms their fears with his words "shalom – peace be with you". Maybe Thomas was fearful that his "doubt" expressed in verse 25 would also elicit censure or rebuke from Jesus. How do you think he would have reacted to this greeting?
- Some people see God as a stern character waiting to rebuke them for their mistakes. Others see him quite differently. How do you view Jesus? If you met him face to face, would you expect a rebuke for your failings or a blessing and the words, "Do not be afraid, peace be with you"?

Verse 27

- Addressing Thomas directly, Jesus gives him the evidence and proof of his resurrection that he had asked for. Why do you think he did this? After all, Jesus was stood in the room with him! Wasn't that evidence enough? Do you think that God expects us to have "blind faith" today, or is our faith reasonable and based on good evidence?

Verse 28

- Do you remember the first time you decided that Jesus was going to be your "Lord and God"? Why do you believe in Jesus, and what first led you to faith? Share your story with the group.

Verse 29

- Jesus clearly anticipated that there would be believers like us; people who believed and yet had not had the chance to see Jesus in the flesh and touch his wounds. Do you feel more blessed or less blessed by having not seen Jesus face to face? Jesus said you would be more blessed! Was he lying?

Verse 31

- Verse 31 is probably the key verse in understanding this passage. Thomas needed evidence in order to be able to believe in Jesus as “Lord and God” and believe in the resurrection. John writes that “these words” in his Gospel have been written “that (we) may believe”. In the light of Thomas’ story, John is telling us that the scriptures are our encounter with Jesus, and the evidence that we need to believe. Read Romans 10:17. If you are honest, do you spend enough time hearing and reading the Word of God? Do you think your level of faith would be different if you spent more time in the Bible?

Faith is not believing blindly or without evidence. Faith is not unreasonable or naive. Faith is trusting in the reliability of God's Word, even when sometimes we can't see the reality yet. Sometimes faith is living according to God's Word and believing in his promises in the midst of doubt and questions. It means saying, “I don't understand this at the moment, and I don't feel it is true; but it must be because the Bible says so”. We are called to live by faith, not by feelings! Read the following verses from the Bible and share some thoughts about them: Mark 9:23-24, Romans 4:17 (What does it mean to call things that are not as though they were?) and Hebrews 11:1

Witness:

We are Christians because at some point in our life someone told us about God, about the Gospel story, about the Bible and about the church. It may have been a parent or a family member, a

teacher or a Sunday school teacher. If we were taken to church by our parents it might have been a minister or a priest. Whoever it was, all of us are in church now because someone else told us something which started our faith journey.

Thomas, like some of the other disciples, was a follower of Jesus because someone had told him about Jesus in the first place, and he had come to see what all the fuss was about for himself. (See John 1:40-42 and verses 1:45-46). This encounter with Jesus comes about after the other disciples had shared their story of encountering the risen Lord with Thomas (John 20:25)

Right now, close your eyes and pray this prayer: “Lord, show me someone who I can start to share my faith with this week. Show me their face, or give me their name, and then give me wisdom and courage to speak about you. Amen”

In the space below, write the name of the person you were thinking about as you prayed. Sometime this week try and start a conversation with that person about your faith. Maybe you can tell them you have joined a new Bible study group, or maybe you can tell them about something which will be going on in your church in the near future; there are many ways to start a conversation about Jesus. Next week, tell the rest of the group if you were brave enough to do it!!!

I will pray for the following person this week, and try to share my faith with them:

WEEK SIX
Revelations at the Ascension
by Steve Brind — Immanuel Church
Matthew 28:16-20, Luke 24:5-53 and Acts 1:1-11

WELCOME: I AM GLAD I'M HERE

Let the leader of the group say why he or she is glad to be there. Then say "If I were not here today I would be ..."

Share something that you are glad you don't have to do (e.g. do the ironing, the tax return...) Then go round the room asking, "If you weren't here today, what would you be doing that you are glad that you don't have to do?" Try to keep the answers light and fast moving.

WORSHIP: WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

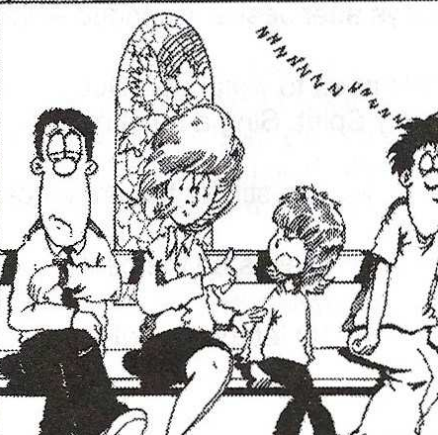
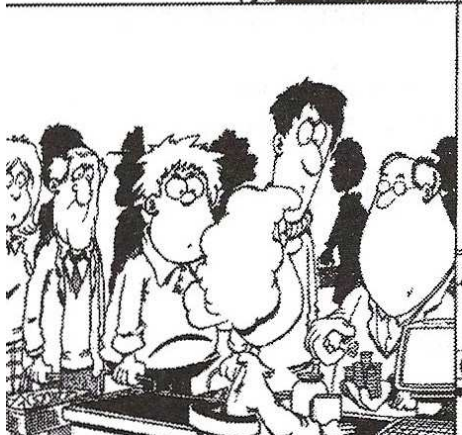
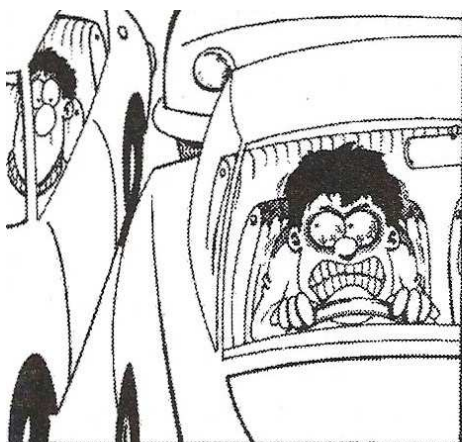
Look at the pictures on the next page – What are they waiting for?

Read Acts 1:4 "Wait for the gift my Father promised".

Remember the scene of the 120 believers in the upper room in the days after Jesus ascended – waiting, praying, worshipping.

We need to wait upon God to give us a fresh touch from his gift, the Holy Spirit. Sing a quiet reflective song on the theme of waiting.

- "Be still for the presence of the Lord",
- "Jesus be the centre",
- "O let the son of God enfold you".



Word:

Read: Acts 1:1-11

“All that Jesus began to do and teach” (v1-2).

In the opening of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke explains that he is writing the sequel to his first volume, which we now know as the gospel of Luke. He states that volume 1 was written to declare what Jesus began to do and teach, until he was taken up to heaven. The word “began” is instructive, because it indicates that in Luke’s mind the work and teaching that Jesus started continues through the life of his followers. In one sense, the book of Acts has a beginning, but no end, as the mission of Christ becomes the mission of the church. We are still writing Acts today!

“He gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive” (v3-4)

Luke records that, following his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus met with his disciples over a period of 40 days. Given the protracted nature of his visits, it seems unlikely that these were merely hysterical experiences or emotion-induced delirium. And Jesus returned to a familiar topic during those meetings – a topic with which he commenced his ministry – the kingdom of God (see Mark 1:14-15)

Questions:

- ***In what ways did Jesus prove that he was alive?***
- ***Why was the physical reality of the resurrection so important to the early believers? How should this truth shape our faith and practice?***

“Wait for the gift ... of the Holy Spirit” (v4-8).

The apostles were told to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that they would be “baptised with the Holy Spirit”. Jesus said that when the Spirit came they would “receive power”.

Questions:

- ***Describe what you think Jesus meant by being baptised with the Holy Spirit. You may wish to refer to Acts 2:1-4.***
- ***Why is water baptism a suitable metaphor for baptism with the Holy Spirit?***

Describe some practical ways in which we can “wait” for the work of the Spirit in our lives.

“You will be my witnesses” (v8).

The apostles were to be witnesses to what they had seen and heard. Jesus was not using the term “witness” in a technical, Christian sense, but in the ordinary sense of the word. A witness:

tells others (you can't be a witness without speaking)
what they have seen

Questions:

- ***What had the apostles seen?
To what events were they witnesses?***
- ***In what sense does our experience match theirs?***

Describe how you have been able to share with others your own experience of God

This is the essence of Christianity; we have met with Jesus, we have experienced him, and as a result we want to tell others what we have seen and experienced.

The scope of the apostles' mission was universal. They were to start locally, at Jerusalem and moving out to Judea. Then increasingly the message would cross national boundaries, reaching to all countries and people-groups. Despite the popular misconception, we should remember that Christianity is in fact not a Western religion - it began in the Middle East. But the Bible insists that the message of God's love in Jesus Christ is of universal application.

Question:

Discuss as a group the involvement that group members have had in mission work in:

- ***Our immediate geographical area of South Wales***
- ***The United Kingdom***
- ***International missions***

“Why do you stand here looking into the sky?” (v9-11).

It is unsurprising that the disciples stared upwards, faces agog, jaws dropping at the incredible events they had witnessed. But the arrival of the angels brought the attention of the apostles back down to earth. This was necessary, because God did not want them simply to commemorate the occasion, but to share what they had seen with the world. They were called not only to meditate, but also to be messengers.

So, the death, resurrection and return of Jesus therefore became not just their meditation, but also the message which the apostles brought to everyone who would listen. It is exactly the same message that we have inherited as we continue to write the unfinished book of the Acts!

Questions:

- ***Why is the ascension important to us? What does it promise for the future?***
- ***Discuss the balance between worship and witness; between meditation and message in the Christian life.***
- ***How should the reality of the ascension and the promise of Jesus' return affect our outlook on life?***

Witness:

The opportunity to share our faith with others often occurs within ordinary conversations. We are likely to have perhaps 1 or 2 minutes in which to explain why we believe in God.

In the space below, write out in bullet points an explanation of your faith that you could deliver in 1 minute or less. This is a really useful exercise to help us focus on the essentials of our faith, and how we can communicate them succinctly.

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