

SERMON FOR ASCENSION SUNDAY | 02.06.2019

Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 1: 15-23; St Luke 24: 44-53

Derren Brown, David Blain, Steven (Dymano) Frayne: in popular entertainment there has always been a place for people who can make things disappear. In a recent interview Derren Brown was talking about how it is possible to manipulate what people ‘see’ so that people simply don’t know how his tricks are done: his expertise is in making sure his audience don’t look in the wrong places!

I want us to think about this word disappear on the day when we remember how Jesus ‘disappeared’ from view, 40 days after his Resurrection. Because disappear tends to be a fairly negative feature of most of our lives.

Simply put, we lose things all the time. They disappear. We put something down and go and do something else. When we come back they aren’t there any more. I had tickets for last night’s Pocket Prom; they had been on my desk for days but yesterday – gone! In fact, still gone. I have no idea where they got to despite spending a fruitless hour and more trying to find them. We can all tell stories like that.

Bits of our daily lives that ‘disappear’ is one thing – annoying though it may be. But this word represents something much more worrying: in many parts of the world where it isn’t a matter of just mislaying things but of the disappearance of people. In Argentina a whole generation of young men were ‘disappeared’ by the military in the 1980s for so called political offences – and never seen again. In Nigeria and other parts of Africa, the abduction and disappearance of young girls (and not just girls) is so regular it barely hits the news any more.

Equally, commercial interests in the Amazon rainforests result in the savage disappearance of whole swathes of the precious jungle with all its complicated eco-systems; in Africa the disappearance of elephants and other endangered species goes on relentlessly. Closer to home the disappearance of urban communities through redevelopment in the 1960s onwards has led to massive social changes and the breakdown of strong social relationships, built up over generations. It happened here on our own Packington estate and it will take another generation or two to rebuild.

So when Jesus talks about leaving his disciples – about disappearing, it isn't a particularly happy thought. The crucifixion had traumatized them at the time, but at least he was back and they had somehow got used to having him around again – although you never quite knew when or where!

So when Jesus says to the disciples that it is now time for him to go – it isn't surprising they want to know a few more details: *is this, they ask, the time for some new government to be set up which will guarantee stability and truth and justice from hereon in? Is this the time when the Kingdom of God on earth will be rolled out?*

It's a straight question but Jesus' answer is a bit like Derren Brown's: *I want you to look at this in a different way* he says. *I want you to break the habit of a lifetime and to look at what's really going on - not at the bits that interest you or the things you understand or what you can control.* Not surprisingly the disciples want Jesus to stay as he is - and they can't wait for him to bring in some recognisable form of the 'reign of God' - just where they are. Their hope is for a visible and stable peace.

And what Jesus wants is for them to let him go: to let him 'disappear'.

All on a promise; the promise that what they would receive from God in the next few days – what we know as the gift of the Holy Spirit – would be so much better than just having Jesus around odd times by the lakeside or at the BBQ.

But what if that test was put to us? What are the chances that we would exchange certainty for the promise of something only potentially better? Would we take the gamble, take the risk? Cash in hand - or some dreamed up pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? £5,000 now or the possibility – if we trust him - of £5 million later? What would you do?

Fortunately, in those 40 days since Easter Jesus had prepared the disciples to take a great leap of faith: whatever their instincts told them they now knew that they could trust Jesus and that what he said would happen, **WOULD happen!**

Disappearing wasn't the end of the world; it wasn't loss: it was the gateway to the future they really wanted.

Most of us hate letting go of what we know. Moving house, moving jobs, losing friends and family – even joining a new Church: they are all hard work. We have to put our lives back together again and that is often really painful.

But what the Ascension of Jesus is teaching us is that making the right break – not the abduction stuff or the clearing of rain-forests of course – making the right break is the way that God works. He asks us to leave the old behind, not because it was bad but because it had now served its purpose.

The time has come for a new way of working, one where we rely – not on sight, familiarity, custom and tradition - but on the guidance of the Holy Spirit who will reveal all kinds of opportunities that we hadn't even considered.

Go into the city, says Jesus, and wait. Wait for new gifts, a new way of looking, a new energy. And when it comes, not only will you not regret letting go of the past, there will be no stopping you!

Let's not pretend that having Jesus there – however unreliable that was – is not hugely comforting. Of course it was. But it isn't Christianity.

Christianity, the way of Jesus, is the path without the signposts, the route without guarantees that all will be neatly wrapped up by the end of the day.

Christianity says: follow where the Spirit leads. Suck it and see. And when you look back weeks, months even years later, you will be able to see what the Holy Spirit has done in your life – and how much further you have come than if you had stayed where you were.

And like the disciples, hopefully you will want to spend your time praising God for all that he has done, even though the physical presence of Jesus had disappeared.

Sometimes disappearing is good.