

Mike's message

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. (Acts 2 .46)

I was reflecting over Easter about empty church buildings and the empty tomb. It then occurred to me that the Risen Christ didn't appear in the Jerusalem temple, it would have put the wind up a few Sadducees if he had, or a synagogue. Instead he appeared in a garden, in the open countryside, on a beach and in a room where people were shut in. Who did he appear to? Mary Magdalene, in the isolation of bereavement. Frightened individuals who'd locked themselves away because of the threat of harm and death that they believed stalked outside. A couple walking in the countryside who later recognise him in the context of an ordinary meal. A group at a beach barbecue (not recommended in the current situation as I write) where the participants were confused, frightened, and full of unresolved guilt and failure.

As the followers of Jesus emerged as a distinctive group, the things that were central to their emerging traditions were carried out in ordinary homes; breaking bread, prayers, fellowship, and providing for the needy. A 'holy place' was still important - as the verse from Acts (above) confirms - but it wasn't central to their living of Christ's teaching. Later on some of those ordinary homes become designated worship venues, the first churches. The Christian Church was evolving fast.

We encounter the Risen Christ in a specific way when we're gathered together as *The Church* - usually in our *church building* (the two terms are distinct). But the Risen Christ is also fully present in the pastoral phone call, the food parcel, and even the online meeting! He's in scripture, and also in online teaching and nurture. He's in the daily work of the NHS, of care homes, day centres and places of fellowship.

Christ's presence in Holy Communion has been a challenge for many in the context of lock-down. Some denominations encourage participants to have bread and wine present in front of their computer screens or phones, and view that as an act of Holy Communion. Other denominations have expressly stated that ministers should not do this. We have the full range of opinions across our three denominations, which poses quite a dilemma in ecumenical contexts.

But Jesus shared many, many more meals with his followers than that one Passover that Christians regard as the institution of Holy Communion. The Risen Christ can be present in meals shared in contexts such as the Methodist tradition of The Love Feast, as some of us shared online in the Birmingham District's worship on Easter Day. In the breaking of bread (or cake) and sharing of wine (or water) Christ is can indeed be truly present. Alleluia! Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia.

