Luke 20:36b-38.

On Easter Sunday I happened to be in a small coastal town in Spain. Corinna and I got up early so that we would be ready for my brother who would drive us to the town centre to watch a procession. It was the beginning of the Roman Catholic churches celebration of Easter. It began with two processions, one coming up from the seashore and the other starting at the church in the middle of town. My brother John was one of three Brits carrying a banner that led the church procession. Behind him were three drummers and then 8 female acolytes in golden capes over there white garments with the priest carrying a monstrance with the blessed sacrament in its centre at the end. He was flanked by four men dressed as Roman centurions.

The other procession had two life sized statues, one of Mary the mother of Jesus and one of the local patron saint, Jaun. 60 women were carrying Mary and about 40 men were carrying Juan. As this group came up the main street, the drummers of local band were beating out a rhythm worthy of an Italian opera or Star Wars. It was stirring stuff, announcing something dramatic. Then the whole band struck up with what sounded like a piece of Italian opera. All this time the processions are coming closer and closer, head to head. Then a woman gives a signal on a bell and the procession from the sea stops and is silent. The priest lifts the monstrance, with the communion bread in its centre, Then the women with great effort tip the statue of Mary, as a symbolic bow to the risen Christ. Then the rest of the procession goes past and then they all crammed into the church service. We didn`t go, it was all in Spanish and we could n`t understand a word. Instead later on we went to a small independent English church just 50 metre away from where the statues had met. The pastor was casually dressed, the hymns were modern and projected onto the wall by a beamer and instead of a sermon, four members read out how four characters in the Easter story told their story. A lady led the prayers, which were written by her and they were well prepared.

 Within the space of two hours, it appeared that I had gone from Catholicism with its most dramatic and ornate ritual, something almost as simple as a Quaker meeting. But both were centred on the physical reality of the resurrection. They were united in their faith in Christ as the Risen Lord. They were certain that it really happened.

But not everyone is convinced? When you read the last chapters of the Gospels of John and Luke, they make it quite clear, that the disciples also took a lot of convincing. Just a few minutes ago, I read the story of how the disciples were gathered in a room in Jerusalem. Two of the group had previously walked to Emmaus just outside of Jerusalem. A stranger had caught up with them and asked them what were they talking about. The two disciples stop in their tracks. Look at the man , and s, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

“What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.” Notice they don`t believe the women. How unusual of them. Machoism at its most arrogant.

Jesus explains from the scriptures how this was part of God`s plan, but they still don`t get it until Jesus breaks the bread at the supper and then disappears. They decide to get back to Jerusalem as fast as they can and find the 11 disciples plus a group of others in a room. They tell them what has happened. But two men are no more believed than the women. Why else would Jesus have said to them, “Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts? And so he invites look at his hands and feet. But they still think this is too good to be true. He then provides further confirmation that he is not a ghost by eating some salted fish. And then just as he had explained to the two disciples in Emmaus, so he explains to the larger group that it was God`s plan to send the Messiah and that he would suffer and would rise from the dead.

Well to give credit to the disciples they did take this in, for you will notice that the first reading, a sermon by Peter about 6 weeks later. It is also the core message of Pauls` teaching in his letters.

 The core of this message is a story that begins with Abraham and Moses. It is a story of a God who reaches out to change the world as it is. He seeks to do this by transforming mankind into a new humanity, through a new relationship with him. The letter from John gives a word picture of this new relationship. We are gods children. This is achieved by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But it is important to take note of two things. First there must be a readiness for us to be changed by God. Peter describes this as repenting and turning to God.

What is repentance? Well, one prominent Anglo- Catholic theologian Alan Richardson said, it is much more than a change of mind, it involves a whole re orientation of the personality. So I understand that as a desire to turn away from that which is destructive and exploitive, selfish and self serving and to follow Christ, not just in word, but in deed. Or as the apostle John puts it. “No one who abides in him sins, no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, Let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as Jesus is righteous.

 Paul also stresses to the churches that he founded, the need for a new pattern of behavior. But it must be stressed that while each individual is responsible for their relationship with God. The Christian life can only be lived out in communities. In his recent book, Paul , a biography by Tom Wright, he stresses that Paul not preaching a private spirituality that sees God`s kingdom as not of this earth, but only found in heaven. It is not about cultivating one`s own spiritual interiority. It is not about discovering our true selves. It is about God`s work to transform this dark world. It`s about challenging the principalities and powers, the rulers and authorities of this dark age. Their power is awesome and frightening. As someone who came of age in the late 60s, I was naïve to think that the world could be changed quite easily. But the liberal agenda of that era lies in tatters. The world can be changed, but only as we repent, trust in God and form communities which are strongholds of love and mutual support, training grounds where we learn to confront the world and launching pads to go out to rescue the whole of creation. That is not simply the rhetoric of Paul, it is the reality of a world that is being changed by the power of the resurrection. New life instead of death, joy in place of grieving, justice where there was inequality and above all love conquering hatred. And as for fear, the peace of the risen lord be with you.