

**“Witnesses to all these things” a sermon based on Luke 24:36b-48
preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 18 April 2021 by
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I want to take what law students would call a case study approach to the text today. I am going to look at a particular set of events and then ask – what does the text today tell us about what happened. Here is the case. In the early 1990s, Lake Alice Psychiatric Hospital near Marton in the North Island began to close. Dates were set for people to be returned to the community, including in Whanganui. In the middle of Whanganui was the congregation of St Paul’s Presbyterian. In that congregation, there was a man who had recently come to faith. He had started attending worship and, being an accountant, not long after became Treasurer. He was a senior businessman and chaired the local health authority so he knew what was happening at Lake Alice. He persuaded the church council that they had resources to help people relocate from Lake Alice and settle in the city. So a community living trust was formed, the trust began preparing to rent properties and the church looked to buy a large home for people most affected by mental illness so they could lease it to the trust.

However, there was a lot of opposition. People did not want people from Lake Alice living in their community. They called them paedophiles and murderers and that headline figured in the local paper. There were meetings in local halls, hundreds of people protested. Their photos were on the front page of the local newspaper. The people on the trust board received threatening phone calls. A confidential application to the city council regarding planning permission, was leaked to the press. Every address of potential houses was disclosed. Then the mayor of the city came out in opposition. The city council began to debate what to do, including the possibility of funding the opposition. In the meantime, the church council kept discussing what was the right thing to do. Month by month, they looked at the biblical passages that had to do with drawing in people who were ostracised and unwell, people who were on the edge. There was enough biblical material to keep them going for many months. Then people in the congregation began to express dissent to what the church council was doing. Some resigned. Some stopped attending. Another part of the Presbyterian Church in the city expressed concern.

And the church council kept taking advice from a psychiatrist in the congregation and from the person on the regional health body, kept talking, kept praying and kept clarifying what was the right thing to do. But the time was getting short, and the pressure was on. Then as the house was about to be bought, elders started receiving

phone calls from people who were opposed, and people in the community, and people in the congregation. And they received a lawyer's letter making threats of complaint and retribution. Naturally, the church council paused and wondered .. and they carried on. The minister and the Session Clerk went to a meeting of the city council and said that if any money went from the city to the opposition groups, the church would refuse to pay its rates and would persuade as many other people as possible to do the same. All of this was reported in the local newspaper.

So what happened? The house was bought and for nearly thirty years housed people in care until it was no longer needed. Every year people in the congregation had events where they mixed with the residents of the home. The Community Trust acquired many properties and housed many people. People in those properties became increasingly well. And the events of that time became part of the story of that congregation.

Now what has this to do with this text? In many ways, the events played out the gospel we heard. He stood among them and said "Peace be with you". Not the kind of peace that comes from withdrawing from society, not the kind of peace that goes with fitting into society, but the peace that is given amid engaging the world, amid tumult and opposition. These words are spoken after the religious and Roman authorities brutalised and crucified Jesus. After Judas betrayed Jesus and Peter disowned him and the disciples fled. At a time, when any of the disciples could have been pursued and arrested. Through all that tumult of that time in Whanganui, elders said they felt that God was guiding them, through scripture, through prayer, through taking expert advice, through paying attention to those most on the edge. The peace of the word, not the peace of the world.

And what happened in Whanganui had much to do with the suffering of our nation. Since then, inquiries into Lake Alice have shown how horrific life there was. The church council kept asking – who are the most excluded people in our city? People with mental illness. And the Jesus we follow, is the Jesus one in body with us. When he showed them his hands and his feet, what did they see? Did they see, a perfectly healed body that showed no signs of suffering? Did they see, a body that showed no sign of healing, but which bore all the marks of crucifixion? I prefer to believe that although in some way healed, Jesus bore the marks of his suffering and crucifixion. The body of Christ is a body in which people carry the marks of their humanity, their imperfection, tying them to the suffering of our world. That Whanganui congregation saw themselves as one with people who needed housing. In the Apostles' Creed, there are these words - I believe in the resurrection of the body. Now that is not a scientific or medical statement. It is not a statement about what happens beyond

death. It is a theological statement. It says that God is concerned with the physicality of our living, with the matter of life, with our bodies, the physical well-being of people. The life death and resurrection of Jesus affects the materiality of our existence. The resurrection of the flesh, of the body, says that the whole of who we are is caught up in the raising of Jesus. That is why we seek to house people who need housing.

And more than that, resurrection discloses the world that is coming. It is said that when people try to cut through wood with a karate chop, they are asked not to imagine the moment of hitting the wood, but the time afterwards, as the wood falls away. So resurrection is not really about the moment of Jesus being raised. The Bible tells us nothing about that. Rather the Bible tells us about what happened afterwards, the difference it makes, the future it opens out, the possibilities that are coming towards us. Resurrection is about the breaking in of God's future. That means that we do not need tenaciously to hold on to what we have because we can see a time when the world will be what God wants it to be, the time called the reign of God. Now this is not always easy to hold on to. Doubt and disbelief figure prominently here. Doubt and disbelief go with faith. They are not the opposite of faith. There were many times that church council doubted what they were doing. They anguished over challenging the city council. They wanted to avoid legal action. They didn't like being in the local newspaper. Doubt and disbelief provided the grit our decision-making needed. It helped us imagine a city in which people who were mentally unwell could feel safe and protected. The word we use for that reimagining is repentance – imagining God's world now.

So where in the events were the witnesses to all this including to resurrection. They were the doctors and nurses who saw that people were in hospital that ought not to have been there and raised questions and agitated until something was done. They were the person who saw what the church could do. They were the church council who read the Bible, who prayed, who were committed to people on the edge and who persevered. They were the people who came to see that the way they had lived for decades in a hospital need not be their future, and they trusted it could be different. And so we live out our identity as witnesses to all this, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

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