Easter Day

On this lovely Easter Day, I want to invite you to join me in going out for the day. We're going to visit two places basking in the Mediterranean sunshine. So off we go.

You may have heard of Joppa. A small village - a bit like an old tumble-down seaside village at home. A haven for artists and writers. A kind of Cornish St. Ives. As I knock on the door, it's opened by a suntanned man called Simon. He gives us a great welcome. His cottage smells of leather and tanning. All very homely.

"You're just in time to meet Peter," he says. "He has been staying with me, but has just been called away to Caesarea, up the coast, to visit old friends".

“What was Peter doing here?” I ask myself. And all alone too. Then it dawns on me that Peter just had to get away, to visit an old friend to whom he could open his heart and try to get his head around all that had happened in recent days. Just after you've lost your best friend, and you've been to his funeral, it doesn't make sense when he turns up again. It's a nonsense.

 “But He has been turning up again, even when the doors of my house have been bolted and barred," Peter says. "And it's not just me. Other friends have seen him, eaten meals with him, and touched the places where he was nailed to that awful cross.  It’s hard to figure it out. Except that He did say that after three days He would rise again. I can hear him saying that. It must be true, it must be. Simon here in Joppa has been such a friend. He's been very patient and understanding. He's taken it for real. And that has helped me such a lot. Thank God for friends who know that God can do everything".

So, we leave Simon and his cottage tannery as He says farewell to his friend Peter. "Christ is risen," he says, as he embraces him.

Peter answers. "He is risen indeed".

The Mediterranean glimmers in the afternoon sunshine. A lovely background to the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. Very different from the little cottage in Joppa. This house is quite grand. It has three floors. The top one is open to the sea and is a very large reception room. Cornelius is a man of substance and a centurion in the Roman army. He has a large number of friends and loves entertaining them.

As we arrive, many others are gathering. We are all made welcome and shown to seats with rugs and cushions. Cornelius has sent a carriage and an escort for his guest who is coming from Joppa. Then Peter arrives. He's a bit shaken at first when Cornelius makes a fuss of him but manages to shrug it off. And as he looks around the room, he sees only Gentiles. Oh dear! “What is this meeting that he has come to?” he asks himself. Then he remembers.

Legally, I am breaking the law. Jews are not to push their religion to those of other faiths. But then Cornelius is also breaking the law by inviting his non-Jewish friends to what seems to be a free-for-all. Cornelius comes to Peter's rescue. "Take heart, my friend, all of us here want you to tell us more about the events of the last few days. And who better than you, because you have been part of it all. You have seen it all from the beginning".

Peter then tells everyone the story of how he met Jesus. Of how he was very scared of what being a disciple meant. He gives his own story of the amazing things Jesus did for people, and how they hung on his every word. As he speaks, there is a strange silence in the upper room. Everyone is caught up in a strong sense of togetherness and brotherly love. They are held in the Spirit. The silence is exciting. Nobody stirs. They seem to be waiting for something to happen.  So Peter calls for water to baptise those who want to be part of the Jesus story. Everyone is happy and delighted. The people clamour for him to stay with them and give them more of our Lord's teaching. They reach out to him.

Peter has discovered that being risen with Christ is a journey. An exciting journey. It all begins with affirming your belief that Jesus, who was such an extraordinary person, really was crucified. But that was only the beginning, because God raised Him from the tomb, and set Him free to live and move among us and bring us home to God his Father. So, like Peter we have to move on.

As we leave Cornelius and his friends this morning, Peter turns and greets them all with a loud voice **"Christ is risen"** he says.  With a thunderous roar they all reply

"**He is risen indeed". Hallelujah!**