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## “Joy and Disbelief”

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Luke 24:36-43

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Today’s scripture passage is a continuation of the story of the encounter on the Road to Emmaus. I won’t retell the whole story here, but I encourage you to read it for yourself from the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke. At this point in the story, the two companions from Emmaus have returned to Jerusalem and found the eleven remaining disciples gathered together. They related to them the details of their unexpected encounter with the Risen Christ.

In that very moment, Jesus himself appeared among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Despite what the disciples had just been told by the two companions and by Peter, whose own encounter with the Risen Christ is alluded to but not described, they were terrified when they saw Jesus. They thought he was a ghost. He showed them the marks of the nails in his hands and his feet. Then, to demonstrate that he was real, Jesus ate a piece of fish in front of them.

Let’s be honest: this is a weird story. Somehow, between Mark and Luke, we’ve gone from an empty tomb and witnesses who tell no one what they saw to Jesus popping up on a country road and behind locked doors, eating to demonstrate that he’s not a ghost.

I have to confess, I often skip over the passages describing Jesus’s post-resurrection appearances. That’s not because I don’t believe in Resurrection; I very much do. But these words from Luke read to me like a description of Jesus performing a party trick, a rather inelegant way of demonstrating the Resurrection, at least in my assessment. And such physical demonstrations offered as evidence to convince the reader of bodily resurrection seem to me unnecessary and incongruous with what it means to have faith in the first place.

But I don’t think Luke is all that interested in elegance or what we I might make of his literary presentation. I think his primary concern – perhaps his *only* concern – is what the Risen Christ meant to the disciples and, by extension, to all of us. Three points stand out to me:

1. *Jesus brings peace.* Imagine the emotions the disciples were feeling. Just three nights earlier, they had shared an intimate final meal with Jesus. They’d stood by helplessly as he was arrested in the garden, abandoning and then denying him. They’d witnessed his public execution and descended into the darkness of despair. They were confused by reports of an empty tomb, gathering together for support, struggling to make sense of it all. It was late at night, and they probably hadn’t slept much in days. Their nerves were shot, their emotions raw.

Suddenly, Jesus is among them. Even though they’d both heard and told of his rising, when he appears they think he is a ghost. Their first encounter with the Risen Christ isn’t joyful, it’s *terrifying*. They are completely unprepared. Is this the Jesus they knew and trusted and followed, or the spirit of Jesus come to bring judgment on the world? What would he do next?

If Jesus appeared among us today, how would *we* respond? If he showed up in your living room this morning or sat down at your kitchen table, would you feel joy or fear? Maybe a little of both?

Jesus’s first words to the disciples that night were “Peace be with you.” When Jesus enters our lives, it isn’t to instill fear, but to bring peace. Luke doesn’t record this encounter simply to report what happened. He’s teaching us. In our Christian witness, which Jesus do we share with the world – a Jesus of fear and judgment or a Jesus who brings peace to our chaos? If we’re inviting people to encounter the Risen Christ, it’s important to know what that means.

2. *Doubt is expected.* Jesus senses the disciples’ fear, but also their uncertainty. “Why are doubts arising in your hearts?” But instead of giving them a lecture or chastising them for the weakness of their faith, he gently redirects their attention and their energy. Luke describes something beautiful in verse 41: “In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” Is it possible to be joyful and doubtful at the same time? Each of the Gospels that records a post-resurrection appearance describes the disciples as having doubts. That’s more than just honest storytelling. If even *they* had doubts, what makes us think we shouldn’t?

Doubt is not a mark of shame or failure; it is a sign of taking faith seriously. We are not “bad Christians” because we have doubts about what we believe or because we sometimes struggle with the words of scripture. Faith is not so

much a matter of certainty as it is perseverance in the face of doubt. It's not a sign your faith is strong if you never ask questions. It may, in fact, be a sign of weakness if we avoid them. If faith is genuine, it can stand up to the questions on our minds and in our hearts. *True* faith is stronger because it is tested.

That doesn't mean we'll necessarily find answers to the questions we have. I've often found that my questions don't lead to answers so much as they lead to better questions. But asking better questions can get us closer to the heart of God. I think that's what Jesus had in mind when he taught us to ask, seek, and knock. The searching itself is a spiritual discipline.

3. *The Risen Christ is the Jesus who died.* To demonstrate that he isn't a ghost, Jesus shows the disciples his hands and his feet, then he eats a piece of fish. That may seem like a silly detail to a modern person like me, but in the world of the disciples, it was an essential proof. In the ancient world, people believed in ghostly encounters, but they believed that beings from the spiritual world could not eat or drink as we do.<sup>1</sup>

Belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is and has always been an important part of our faith. Unfortunately, for those who seek to narrowly define what it means to be Christian, it's become a sort of "litmus test" for who is a real Christian and who isn't. Luke's emphasis has little to do with orthodoxy or countering heresy. In establishing Jesus's bodily resurrection, Luke wants to establish that *the Risen Christ is the Jesus who died*. The Jesus who appears to the disciples is not a disembodied spirit, but Jesus himself, risen and whole. There is no separation between the pre- and post-resurrection Jesus. They are one and the same.

This has critical implications for us. Our faith cannot focus on spiritual dimensions and ignore the needs of this world. The Christ who calls us to bear witness to his resurrection is the *same* Jesus who suffered with and for us. We cannot claim to be followers of the Risen Christ if we are not willing to walk with those who are suffering in this life. We cannot espouse a victorious faith that comes without cost. We do not get the empty tomb without the cross. We do not get to pick whether we follow the historical Jesus or the Risen Christ; one is incomplete without the other. In the words of Fred Craddock, "Easter is forever joined to Good Friday, and to follow the risen Christ is to follow the one who bore the cross."<sup>2</sup>

The Christ who suffered with us and for us stands in solidarity with those who are suffering in the world today. As those who would be followers of Christ, we must also stand in solidarity with those who are suffering. We cannot be indifferent to the struggles of our sisters and brothers, even when we do not share those experiences ourselves. We will never truly understand the Christ event if we do not begin with the particularity of the situation into which Jesus was born. The message of the incarnation is that not that God simply became "one of us," but entered the world as a poor Galilean under the yoke of imperial oppression. The Gospel is both universal *and* particular. As his followers, we don't simply look out for ourselves or "our own," but seek mutuality with those who are different from us, walking together as much as we can. We are our brother's and sister's keeper. Poverty, violence, food insecurity, economic injustice, different treatment based on race, gender, identity, or status, aren't just problems for those who experience them directly. They are *human* problems, societal sins for which we must repent and work to bring healing and wholeness. That's one of the reasons it is so critically important for the church to embrace diversity – so that when we encounter the Gospel, we do so in relationship with others who experience it in different ways, deepening our awareness and appreciation for one another. Relationships are a vital link for growing in compassion and advocacy and humility, for becoming more faithful to the Gospel we have received, not just to a way of life we choose.

The unity of the Risen Christ with the suffering Jesus also means that we do not need to conceal the pain we experience in our lives. When Jesus appeared to the disciples, he showed them the marks of the nails in his hands and feet, scars that testified to the agony he experienced on the cross. Jesus knows what it is like to feel pain and loss, to experience betrayal and abandonment and darkness. We serve a Savior who isn't indifferent to pain and suffering. We don't need to pretend that everything is okay when it isn't. The Good News isn't that God takes away our pain or keeps us from experiencing it, but that Christ enters into our suffering and transforms it. We don't live out our faith perfect and unblemished, but wearing the scars of all that we've borne as evidence of Resurrection faith. *It's okay not to be okay.*

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Heinrich. Commentary in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B, Volume 2. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2008), 427.

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock. *Luke. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Edited by James Luther Mays. Louisville: John Knox Press (1990), 290.

Jesus said he did not come to save those who had it all together, but those who were lost. So why do we so often think we have to paint on a smile and polish ourselves before we come together as a church? We don't have to pretend everything is fine to experience the presence of Christ. His place is with us in the midst of real life, not the life we project to make others think we're better than we are. That's not to say we have to be miserable, either. We can have joy in the assurance that Christ is with us to give us strength when our strength fails. And there is joy to be found in the company of those who are real with each other, experiencing Christ's presence together and seeking the most faithful path in response.

Jesus still longs to be with us. He doesn't come to us seeking perfection, but to know us as we are and to help us become something greater. The disciples who gathered that first Easter night knew they were broken, collectively and individually, but they dared to hope. Still, when Jesus came, it was a shock – they didn't know what to make of him or what would happen next. He brought peace into their chaos, just as he longs to bring peace to us today. He reassured them in the midst of their doubts, just as he accepts and guides us through the questions we wrestle with. He showed them the marks of pain he still bore, just as he enters into our pain – not simply to endure it, but to transform it. May we, like the disciples, experience joy, even when what is to come hasn't yet been revealed. Amen.