

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday April 15, 2018
Text: Luke 24: 36-48 RCL Easter 3B
Preacher: Christopher McLaren

“While in their joy they were disbelieving and wondering...” Luke 24:41

Now that is a delicious bit of scripture.

From the very first moment of the Resurrection there is a good deal of doubt and fear from those who knew Jesus best. They had known him the longest, heard all of his teaching, and still there were nagging doubts. The picture we get of his disciples is that they are distressed, confused and fearful.

His followers are portrayed as those who expected that Good Friday was really the end. In this passage they are hunkered down behind closed doors, frightened and worried. His closest followers and friends are plagued by fears and doubts even though there were strange stories coming toward them from the women and other disciples. They doubt that God really did defeat death and evil, and is that really any different than each of us on our worst of days?

I wonder, what your personal doubt-a-meter is like? Have you ever swallowed a little hard on the audacious words the church proclaims, “Alleluia, Christ is Risen, The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia?”

Well as it turns out you are in good company. So, did Jesus' followers. Luke tells us that, “They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost.” Luke 24: 37.

I suppose we can probably relate to the disciples a little now that the glory of Easter Sunday has faded a bit. I mean it is rather easy to believe in the resurrection with all the beautiful music and celebration, or during the chanting of the Exultet at the Great Vigil of Easter or when you've sung “Christ is Risen from the Dead trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life” over and over with the bells of Easter ringing and the glow of candle light. But now perhaps it is a little like my philosophy professor who used to say that though he grew up the son of a Lutheran pastor, he was not a believer except when he was singing the old hymns, that there were moments singing alleluia that he actually did believe, that he felt it was true. My playful and half serious response was to admonish him, “That he needed to sing those old hymns of the church more often.” Some of us, maybe all of us, are a little like the disciples, “in their joy they were disbelieving and wondering” at times.

Into this doubtful situation, Jesus comes. First, he appears to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus while they are busy talking about everything that had happened in

Jerusalem, and later he comes to his doubting and fearful disciples and stands among them. And what does he say? "Peace!" He stills their fears. He shows them his body, his hands and feet, the wounds that he has sustained and that will always mark him as the crucified one. The truth is that even then they thought it was too good to be true, "while in their joy they were disbelieving and wondering" Luke 24:41. But then he did something surprising: he shares a meal with them, at an inn on the road to Emmaus, at a breakfast BBQ on the beach, and then in this passage in a locked room. And what is more, he explains the scriptures to them. He opens their minds and hearts to the oracles of God, to the ancient wisdom of the Holy One.

I want to suggest that this passage is really speaking to us here and now. We gather here each week with all of our doubts and fears. We wonder if Easter is only a pious hope? Is this a nice metaphor for new starts and fuzzy logic?

What does it mean that we are gathered here with all of our doubts and fears? Well first it means that we are real people living in a real and often difficult and untidy world. Being a Christian doesn't change that. What are you afraid of really? Go ahead, make your mental list right now. Consider the many ways that fear manifests itself in your life. Fear that we will never have enough, in the land of too much. Fear that somehow what we have and treasure will be taken from us. Oh, let's be honest. Many of us are afraid that our changing world will leave us behind as some sort of relic or quaint heirloom person. Or are you afraid that your own resistance to change is actually keeping you from living as you fight off the things you don't understand and are terrified of? Oh, there is so much we are afraid of, isn't there? Fear of loving someone again because we've been hurt so badly. Fear that we will get to the end of our life and wonder what it was really all about. Fear that our children will make bad decisions even though we've done our best to prepare them and love them. Fear that we are expending our life force on something that doesn't really matter and we really wish it did. Fear that our own cultural way of life is blinding us from what Jesus desires from us. Fear that if we dared to live out the gospel, embracing the most vulnerable, that we would be seen as religious freaks. Or even more difficult that if we cannot love those whom Jesus loved, the outcast and the needy, that we will be found wanting. Fear that life is so fragile we are almost afraid to live, to hope. We know our fears are rather extensive, and our catalogue of fears continues to grow. As T.S. Eliot put, we are fearful human beings who are only "living and partly living."

The point is that we are no different than the disciples huddled together in fear and anxiety long ago. And the truth is that we need just what the disciples needed long ago. We need Jesus to show up, to demonstrate his bodily presence, to open the scriptures to us, to expand our minds and hearts, to share a meal with us, for these are the things that calm our fears, that speak to our doubts, that nurture our souls.

What we need is to see Jesus, to come to understand his real identity, and this is something that happens each week for us as we gather. The person of Jesus is made know to us in the scriptures and the breaking of bread. In the gesture of the

Eucharist we come to understand who Jesus is and how powerful his death and resurrection is for us and for the world.

As this story of the Risen One reminds us, it is Christ himself who opens our minds to the scriptures. “Then he opened their minds to the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.” And it is Christ who breaks bread with them, shares a sacred meal, and these things together help the disciples to understand, to have a breakthrough. The disciples understand who Jesus is and the larger plan of which Jesus is a part.

Jesus is filled with God’s life, and he gives God’s life to others freely so that they can grow strong on it. Just as bread nourishes the physical body, so Jesus nourishes the spiritual person. Every week we are nourished by the Eucharistic gesture of God: we remember it, participate in it and become part of Christ’s self-giving love. We remember the powerful and life-giving story of Jesus who forgave those who crucified him (though he was afraid), offered salvation to the criminal next to him, and in the end handed over his spirit, his life to God. The deep truth of the Cross and the Eucharistic feast we share in each week is that Jesus is always giving the life of God to others; even as he was dying he was giving God’s life away. We begin to recognize in the breaking of bread in our own Eucharistic feast here and now, that even though we are afraid, even though we have doubts, the divine life is available to us here and now. Jesus is always coming to us, offering the divine life to us in his ongoing Eucharistic gesture that found its fulfillment in the cross. We teach children that God is love. We try to live out that love in our best moments. We declare that love casts out fear. And the truth is that it is the love of God, resident in the Risen One, that is always invading our lives, always coming to us in unexpected ways.

I once heard an Episcopal priest tell a story about a woman who began showing up to the mid-week Eucharist. It was small service, and so she was noticeable. It was hard not to notice that she often cried throughout the service, weeping quietly. She partook of the Eucharist when she was there with interest. He spoke to her after the service each week as he was greeting people and checking-in with folks. Slowly he began to learn a little about her. She lived nearby. She had gone through a difficult divorce. She was guarded and quiet. One day, after the Eucharist, the woman approached the priest and said, “It’s all about the feeding isn’t it, and I am so hungry.” The priest stood there stunned by this insight into the sacred meal he had been a part of offering for so many years. It’s all about the feeding and we are so hungry.

Few of us are people of faith because we have been argued into belief. We are not Christians because we have done a careful analysis and study of the Bible and really decided that it is possible to believe. Nor is it that we have all closed our eyes and “tried really hard to believe the unbelievable.” What stirs faith in our lives is the experience that Christ has come to us, has come into our lives amidst our fears; he has intruded into our troubles and doubts and has offered us God’s life. We have discovered Jesus alive in the Eucharistic feast that nourishes us in ways that we

cannot always describe, but he is food for our hungry souls and nourishment for a journey that wearies us at times.

It reminds me about a numinous song I once heard at a Kirtan Mass, a strange worship experience that moved me then and still does.

Calling out to hungry hearts
Everywhere through endless time
You who wander, you who thirst
I offer you this heart of mine.

Calling out to hungry hearts
Everywhere through endless time
Calling out to hungry hearts
All the lost and left behind

Gather round and share this meal
Your joy and your sorrow
I make it mine.

In the sacred texts of the bible Jesus surprises us with his presence and in the lives of the community around us we see the Risen One at work, preserving life, bringing people back into health, drawing people into relationships that are life-giving. This is why we are people of faith, not because we are people with no doubts or problems, but because Jesus is not afraid to enter our lives at the place of our fears.

When Jesus speaks, "Peace be with you," he restores his disciples to relationship: relationship to God, to people and to themselves. Their friend is not gone or absent, he is with them. The barrier of death has been overcome, and this means that the world is different. All is not as it may seem. There is a surprising tear in the fabric of the universe, and through it the life of God is pouring in. That is the power of the resurrection: Jesus is not dead; he is alive and that means that Jesus is capable of revitalizing his disciples, pouring his life into them, filling them with life that does not end. That is what resurrection means, that in the mist of our fears, in the anxiety of our doubts, in the paralysis of our uncertainties, the life of God comes among us. So, the way to life is not found in running from our fears but in allowing the Risen One to find us in the midst of them, to come amongst our fears and overwhelm them with life, to fill even the darkest places that look like death with the uncanny life of God.

Recently I was discussing the hope that St. Mark's would attract more seekers by reaching out in mission to the neighborhood around us. I was speaking about the missional impulse of the church but also of my own fears and anxieties. The members I was with started talking about why they come to this church, why they

spend their Sunday morning here. The answers were beautiful and moving. They thrived on the fellowship and relationships here. They loved to sing and listen to the music, especially the children singing. Someone even said they like the preaching, go figure. But then one of the people there said, I keep coming because of all the places in my life, it is this place that pulls me into the presence of Christ. When I'm here in this place, I often feel the presence of Christ. Sometimes it's in the preaching or the fellowship, in the encouragement of a friend in Christ, or in the moment of holding the bread in my palm. The truth is I hardly ever come here without feeling the presence of Christ, Christ coming near to me, and I need that in my life.

Now that is one reason to be in church after Easter. Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

Calling out to hungry hearts
Everywhere through endless time
You who wander you who thirst
I offer you this heart of mine.

Calling out to hungry hearts
Everywhere through endless time
Calling out to hungry hearts
All the lost and left behind

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