

Faith Mennonite Church
April 29, 2015 – Eastertide
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You are witnesses

Luke 24:36-48

We're all familiar with mixed emotions. When a beloved elder dies after a long life we feel sadness at their parting yet deeply grateful, even celebratory, as we think of all that we received from them and all that they contributed to the world. When a first-born child heads off to kindergarten parents are filled with pride at their child's growing independence yet they feel the loss of that same dependence. When a youth heads off to college in a different geographical setting, there can be a heady sense of freedom and independence that occasionally gives way to loneliness and even helplessness, especially when illness strikes and no one is around to offer tender loving care. And all of us who live in this country surrounded by abundance often feel pulled between gratitude for what we refer to as blessings and bewilderment, if not guilt, over why so many people in the world are suffering from hunger and disease. Mixed emotions. Familiar indeed.

The resurrection stories in Luke 24 are a veritable cornucopia of mixed emotions. In the first part of the chapter, two disciples were walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. They were in deep grief over the death of Jesus and they are trying to comprehend a report from some women who claimed to have found an empty tomb and to have had an encounter with a risen Jesus. Should they stop grieving? Was the women's story for real? Mixed emotions.

All of a sudden a stranger joined them and questioned what they were talking about. They were dumbfounded that this person didn't seem to know what they are talking about. It was only when they arrived at their destination and invited the stranger in since evening was approaching, that the truth began to dawn on them. The stranger took the bread they offered him and he blessed and broke it. Just as they recognized him as Jesus, Jesus disappeared. Their grief turned to incredulity and joy as they headed back to Jerusalem to share their incredible story.

And this is where our scripture picks up this morning. These two were still talking about their experience with the other disciples when Jesus appeared again. Just as in the account in John that we read last Sunday, the risen Christ entered with a word of peace: "Peace be with you." In John's account, we hear that the disciples were afraid before Jesus appeared. In fact they had locked themselves in, evidently fearing that Jesus' end might become their end too.

Luke's account is somewhat different. Here the fear comes when Jesus unexpectedly appears in their midst. He didn't come through the door like everyone else, but suddenly showed up. Is he a ghost? Jesus is quick to show that he is more than a dream or vision; he had real hands and feet and soon he asks for something to eat. In the cottage in Emmaus, Jesus became known "in the breaking of bread." How many times had the disciples watched Jesus break bread? Several times he fed whole crowds. Just before he died he broke bread as an anticipation, an enactment, of his imminent death. Breaking bread made everything real. Here, among the whole group of disciples, Jesus took and ate fish. Again, the memories—and mixed emotions—must have flooded their senses. How many times had he served and eaten fish with them and the crowds?

In this very short passage Luke uses seven different emotions to describe what the disciples were experiencing: they were startled, terrified, frightened, doubting, joyful, disbelieving and wondering. Note that none of those emotions is grief. A new reality is descending on them and they seem to be accepting that Jesus is alive. But what does this mean? Those who experience the accidental or sudden death of a loved one often feel as if they are in a different reality. "It still hasn't sunk in," I've heard people say. We wonder if we're dreaming.

The disciples too are wondering: Is this a dream that Jesus is alive?

Jesus used his body and his ability to ingest food as a first step in helping the disciples to accept his resurrection. The second step was to remind them how his life and ministry and death were a fulfillment of the holy writings. This was something he had spoken of, something they should have

anticipated. His death was the ultimate step in a life that was lived for others. And his life after death, the resurrection, was the ultimate sign of the way God makes all things new, reconciling divisions, bringing healing where there is sickness, life where death has crept in.

Luke wrote that Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scripture.” We know that, short of a miracle, many if not the majority of people are rather slow to open their minds, to consider something new when they’ve been content with an understanding that has worked for them in the past. Jesus seemed to trust that the disciples would eventually catch on and come along, for he commissioned them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the nations. This was an invitation for all people to turn away from actions and attitudes that were harmful for them and for others and to turn toward God for healing, liberation, and hope. And, Jesus said, “You are my witnesses.” You’ve seen me. You know how this works! Spread the good news!

When we move from the gospel of Luke to its sequel, the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we find the disciples doing just that. They moved from their frightened disbelief and doubts to a joyful confidence in spreading the good news, healing, and sharing their food just as they had learned from Jesus.

New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper has written:

The experience of the presence of the risen Lord led the disciples to see that he had been raised, and the experience of the individual believer and the community of believers is still the foundation of faith. Where the Lord’s physical hands and feet are no longer present, the ministry of the hands of countless saints in simple and sincere ministries continues to bear witness to the Lord’s living presence. Although he may not appear in our midst to eat broiled fish, his presence is tangible in soup kitchens, around the kitchen table, and around the altar table. We see him “in the breaking of bread.” As in the first century so now the most convincing proof of the resurrection is the daily testimony of the faithful that the Christ still lives and the work of his kingdom continues.¹

Jesus continues to say to us “You are witnesses of these things.” It doesn’t matter if we are sometimes frightened and disbelieving, and don’t fully understand. We can invite the Spirit of Christ to open our minds to more fully understand scripture, and to remind us of what we have experienced, of what we have seen. As Paula Okerstrom undergoes major surgery again tomorrow, she needs us to be the witnesses during her time of sedation. We will pray for her and Mike and Hannah. We will recall how well she healed after her first two surgeries. We will trust that God’s healing power will again move through the surgical team and the treatment she will receive. We are witnesses of these things. And Jesus is present saying once again, and always, “Peace be with you.”

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke.” *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume IX: Luke, John*. Abingdon Press, 1995, 490.