

3rd Sunday of Easter
April 15, 2018
Luke 24:36b-48
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Those of you who were here last Sunday may remember that at the conclusion of the sermon we entered a brief period of silence to think about and write down one thing that we don't understand about the Christian faith; something that we wonder about as a person trying to live the faith, or some doubt we may have. The responses that you shared were very thoughtful. I hope to respond to them in a variety of ways

One person wrote on their card: "Did John and Peter completely and truly believe that Jesus rose from the grave when they discovered him gone?"

The gospel writers of Matthew, Luke, and John tell us none of the disciples believed Jesus was risen from the dead until he physically came to be with them and they had the opportunity to interact with him personally.

In Luke's resurrection story, two travelers from Emmaus are returning home from Jerusalem, continuing to believe that the women's report was "an idle tale". They encounter a stranger on the road and tell him what happened in Jerusalem. They report the news of what happened to Jesus and how the tomb was supposedly found empty. But, as this stranger listens, he observes and tells them they are foolish and "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" (Luke 24:25) Jesus then tries to help them connect the dots between what happened and what is happening to him and what the scriptures had told. They invite this stranger to eat with them and it is in the breaking of the bread that they are enlightened; their eyes opened, their hearts burn within them, and they realize that they have been speaking with their risen teacher. Instantly, Jesus exits.

The two disciples hurriedly return to Jerusalem, some twenty miles away. They excitedly tell their companions what happened to them. It is at this moment that today's gospel text begins, and the pattern repeats itself. This is "what they were talking about" (Luke 24:36). When Jesus appears to them, they are frightened and think they are seeing a ghost. *"Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. . . .And he showed them his hands and his feet."*

If you've ever gotten separated from a dear one in a crowd, it's not their hands and feet that we start looking for - is it? No. It's the person's height, weight, hair color or

receding hair line, facial features like eye glasses or beard or mustache, or what type clothing they are wearing. Hands and feet are the last things we would look for to help us identify someone from whom we've been separated.

"He showed them his hands and his feet". These were the most obvious signs of his crucified body, his physical self. Permanently scarred hands and feet, wounds still raw and red and real, flesh jagged, skin torn and bruised. Jesus shows them these signs in his body, these visible reminders of his vulnerability and suffering.

It's an unconventional way to present yourself to someone, isn't it? Sharing your scars. Holding out for others to see the tangible evidence that life is not always fair or just, comfortable or easy. Doesn't turn out the way you hoped it would. But this was the Jesus they could recognize – the vulnerable human one. This is what Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was convicted and imprisoned as an opponent of the Nazi regime meant by a statement he wrote before he died. A slip of paper was found among his belongings after he was executed by the Nazis, just three weeks before the end of World War II. The slip of paper said, "Only a suffering God can help." It's a paradox. We most easily recognize the God who suffers - like we do, the God who understands and suffers with us.

But this is *not* the way we are conditioned and taught to approach life. Are you kidding? We don't show others our vulnerabilities. We do our best to keep them well hidden. "Don't let them see you sweat", those in leadership positions are advised. "Lead with your strengths", we're told. Be ready to show the depth and breadth of the assets you possess – intellectual, material, political, physical, and interpersonal means of influence.

The disciples had witnessed Jesus at his most pronounced point of human vulnerability and fragility. And it is there that they come to recognize him again. *"Touch me and see"*, Jesus says.

This encounter with the risen Lord changes them. Their recognition is a gradual process, almost like a video clip in slow motion. *"While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering. . ."* Filled up with joy and disbelief at the same time. And wonder – that is, awe, but also, "How can this be?" Jesus initiates this meeting, comes to them right where they are. They move from fright and alarm, to joy mixed with disbelief and puzzlement.

When we come here to worship on a Sunday, or any time we want to be near God, we can bring all of ourselves. No part of us is unwelcome or excluded. Not one part needs to be left out, kept hidden away at home. "We all have those moments of wonder when

we recognize God at work in a way that seems miraculous, in both big and small things. Likewise, we are invited to bring to God our disbelief, along with our disappointment or anger when something in life goes wrong and it doesn't feel like God is there. And we are invited to bring our joy when we are caught up in something bigger than ourselves, when we get a glimpse of something beyond mere happiness or delight, a taste of the whole-hearted joy that comes from recognizing and experiencing God's unconditional, whole-hearted embrace of every part of us." [David Lose, "In the Meantime", April 13, 2018].

The resurrection stories in the gospels remind us, writes pastor David Lose, "that joy and disbelief, wonder and knowledge, courage and fear, confidence and insecurity – are not polar opposites – but are all part of our life experience. . . .

Robust Christian faith isn't about embracing only one side of the equation: joy, courage confidence, belief. Rather, robust Christian faith takes root in the tension of joy and disbelief." [In the Meantime, April 13, 2018].

While the disciples are caught up in wondering, standing riveted before him in joy and disbelief, Jesus says, **"Do you have anything here to eat?"**

Ghosts don't get the munchies. Ghosts are spirits, not flesh and blood. And ghosts are no less scary than a corpse brought back to life, raised from the dead.

But hadn't they come to know him in all those meals they shared? His feeding the five thousand gathered out on the hillside. Dinners in the homes of Zacchaeus, Simon the Pharisee, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Sharing their holy faith story and the meal of the Passover. And their last supper together in the upper room before his betrayal and death.

"Have you anything here to eat?" Jesus asks. The disciples had wanted to send those 5,000 people home hungry. And Jesus told them, "They don't have to go home. You give them something to eat." "But Lord, all we have are these five loaves and two fish". "Have the people sit down", he had told them. All ate and were filled, and they gathered up baskets full of leftovers.

"Have you anything here to eat?" Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said, "Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions." The Christian faith teaches that the body is good. It is not lesser than or incidental to the spirit. God has come to humanity in physical form, someone we can see and hear and touch. And it is the physical body we believe is resurrected. This is different from Greek thought, where the human spirit lives on in immortality after the body has died and is discarded. Different than Docetism, an early Christian heresy which taught Jesus only seemed human. He

did not have a real human body. Resurrection of the body is different from Gnosticism, the Greek philosophy which believed what was most important was secret spiritual knowledge. The resurrection of the body, you see, is about what God does, not about what human beings can rationalize or accomplish. Only a living God can raise the dead. And God's business is raising the dead, bringing new life where no life is present.

Jesus had told them to expect his resurrection. But how could they possibly understand what he meant? They didn't and couldn't until faced with the reality of the crucified and risen Jesus standing before them, visibly scarred and now hungry, asking for something to eat. *"He made himself known to the disciples in the breaking of bread."* Over and over and over again.

This is where we meet the living risen Lord today, isn't it – in our own vulnerable and wounded places that need healing? In our deep hunger that cries out for food that will satisfy our need for meaning and belonging, for love and larger purpose beyond our individual selves and achievements.

It's where we meet the living risen Lord today, isn't it - in the vulnerable, scarred and wounded ones we encounter? In the faces, the hands and feet of those who come and ask, *"Do you have anything to eat?"* Can you help me find a place to sleep for the night? Yes, they are seeking physical food and a safe place of shelter that will nourish and sustain their physical bodies. And they also yearn for the living spiritual food of the risen Christ's compassionate human touch. The healing, hope, forgiveness, joy, peace, and love offered for all of us in a body blessed, broken, given and shared for the life of the world.

In the African American worship tradition, it's common for the preacher to punctuate the sermon by saying, "Can I get a witness?" And the responses will ring out from the congregation – "Amen. Preach it brother. Now you're talkin' – Mmm hmm. You know it, sister."

"You are witnesses of these things", Jesus tells the disciples. "Even though they've hardly proven themselves to be particularly confident of what they are experiencing. You don't have to have it all together, apparently, to be a witness. Witnesses have one and only one job – to tell what they see. To tell the truth. And not worry about what happens afterward.

God's invitation today is for us to come and bring our whole selves – our joy, disbelief, wonder, anger, expectations, hopes, disappointments, and dreams. God is eager to gather it all up, meet us where we are, and send us out to be witnesses, witnesses to how God has been present in all of it – Jesus' teaching and compassion and healing. His crucifixion and resurrection. The disciples' and our own slowness to recognize and understand what God has done and is still doing.

We are fed and sent to be witnesses to how God accepted all of this, all of us, promised to use all of it, even bless all of it. This is what God does." *[David Lose, In the Meantime, April 13, 2018].*

"Can God get a witness?" Oh yes, Lord!

Amen.