

**Sunday, April 15, 2018**  
**Third Sunday of Easter (Year B)**  
Luke 24.36b-48  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

On Easter, we celebrate the glorious mystery that is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Throughout the remainder of Eastertide – the great 50 days of Easter – we, along with the disciples, struggle with sorting out exactly what this means for those of us who follow the Risen Lord. For the first couple of weeks of Eastertide, we take a look at various post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in an attempt to answer this question. The disciples struggle with determining how their relationship with Jesus has changed in light of the Resurrection. And with them, we seek to discern how we faithfully live into the resurrected life that we have inherited.

Today we have a post-resurrection account from the Gospel according to Luke. In Luke's telling of the Easter story, this is the third post-resurrection appearance Jesus makes to his followers. Just to recap, since we have not yet heard Luke's version, on Easter morning Mary Magdalene and a number of women go to the tomb with the intent of preparing Jesus' body for burial, which had been hastily placed in the tomb before the start of the Sabbath at sundown on Good Friday. As we know, they find the tomb empty. In Luke's account, neither Mary Magdalene nor the other women actually meet the Risen Lord, but are informed by two men in dazzling white that Jesus has risen. The women rush to tell the other disciples. Peter then goes to the tomb and finds the burial linens on the floor of the tomb. So here are two accounts indicating that Jesus had been raised as he told them would happen. But as yet, no post-resurrection appearances.

The first of the actual post-resurrection appearances occurs on the road to Emmaus on Easter Day, when Jesus appears to Cleopas and his companion. They turn around and hurry back to Jerusalem, seven miles, to tell the disciples. The disciples are all giddy because Jesus had appeared to Peter. The second appearance. And now today we hear of the third appearance, which takes place on the evening of Easter. Despite being in the middle of animated discussion about the first two appearances of the Risen Lord, none of those present recognize Jesus when he appears to them. In fact, they are startled and terrified, and think him to be a ghost. They still haven't quite grasped the reality of Jesus' bodily resurrection.

Now even in our own time, there are many in the Church, many great thinkers – theologians and experts in scripture – who do not believe in the bodily resurrection. That Jesus did not resurrect into a physical body, but rather into some sort of spiritual existence. But today's Gospel tells a different story.

Poor Jesus. The disciples just don't get it. He comes back from the dead, tries to make a connection with those whom he had been close to in life, tries to establish some sort of new relationship with them, and they think he's a ghost. Reminds me of some of the delightful sitcoms of the past. "Topper" in the mid-1950s. Or the "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir" in the late 1960s. Or even "Casper the Friendly Ghost" cartoons of my childhood. In all of these, the ghosts

were not there to terrify, but only wanted to establish a relationship with the living inhabitants of their homes.

Of course, Jesus is not a ghost. Not something to be feared. In an attempt to ease the frightened disciples and convince them that he is not a ghost but has a human body – albeit in resurrected form – Jesus shows them his wounds. They still have mixed emotions. Joy, but also disbelieving and wondering. So, Jesus tries a different approach. He asks, “Have you anything to eat?” (Lk 24.41). It may seem kind of odd. But if he did have a human body, he would have been famished. He hadn’t eaten in three days and there is no food service in the tomb. So the disciples give Jesus what they have, some broiled fish, and he eats it in their presence.

Whether Jesus is hungry or not is not really the point. The point that he is trying to make is that he is not a ghost. That he still has a physical body. That he is made of flesh, just as they are. To demonstrate that he is indeed alive. After all, the dead don’t eat.

As an aside, there is also something poetic about what he eats. The Jewish poetic tradition describes fish as the main course at the messianic banquet. The broiled fish is an appropriate meal, even if only given by chance, for the Messiah who has defeated the enemy that is sin and death and is now celebrating a victory meal, of sorts.

There is something else very symbolic about Jesus eating with the disciples. With him breaking bread – or fish – with them. Beyond seeking to put them at ease and proving that he is as much a physical being as they are, the act of sharing a meal with them is a sign of relationship. One does not generally eat with one’s enemies or with those one does not care about. Sharing a meal is generally reserved for those we are in relationship with. Or those we want to be in relationship with. And that is a key part of what is going on in this story. Jesus is seeking to re-establish relationship with his beloved disciples. He is seeking to establish a new relationship with them, necessitated by the fact that he has been transformed by his death and Resurrection. And so, too, has their relationship.

Jesus seeks to inform the disciples about the new form of this relationship by “[opening] their minds to understand the scriptures” (Lk 24.45). Revealing to them through the words of salvation history the nature of God’s relationship with them as his creation, as his Chosen People, with this relationship being taken to the next level through Jesus’ own birth and life. And now through his death and Resurrection. All so that God’s beloveds may receive forgiveness and new life.

In proving that he is not a ghost, that he does not have some ephemeral, spiritual body, Jesus is demonstrating that our God is one of them. One of us. Flesh and blood, not a disembodied spirit. That ours is not a theoretical, philosophical faith. That ours is a physical faith. This is evidenced throughout salvation history. That God created all that is. That God created us in his image and likeness. That God has continually sought to be in relationship with us. That God became flesh in the form of Jesus. That Jesus suffered a physical death on the cross. That Jesus was resurrected in a physical body. All these acts demonstrate the physicality of our God, the physicality of our faith. As such, our faith is one that must be enacted in physical ways.

The disciples, and all Jesus' followers, are to live into this new resurrected relationship, this new resurrected life in physical and tangible ways. Jesus commends the disciples that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Lk 24.47). That they "are witnesses to these things" (Lk 24.48). He was the teacher. Now they are to be the teachers. We are to be the teachers. He was the witness to God's love. Now they are to be the witnesses to God's love. We are to be the witnesses to God's love.

Through the Resurrection, there is a new relationship with the Risen Lord. There is a new relationship between Christ and the disciples. There is a new relationship between Christ and the world. And this new relationship with Christ will transcend observable reality. They will not be able to see him with physical eyes, but only through eyes of faith. They will not be able to be in his presence, but will still be able to be in relationship. This new relationship will be less about knowing with the mind and more about knowing with the heart.

So it is up to the disciples to carry on with the mission and ministry that he had prior to his death. To teach, to heal, to proclaim God's love. Not as abstract concepts, but in tangible, physical ways. And in the process, to help others come to know the Risen Christ, to be in relationship with the Risen Christ, through faith.

Because of this, it was necessary for the Risen Christ to appear to his disciples. To appear in a physical body as we have. To send a message of what the Resurrection means. To send a message of what the Resurrection has accomplished. To send a message of how we are to live into a new relationship with Christ. To send a message of how we are to live into the resurrected life.

It was necessary for Jesus to appear to his disciples in a physical body to prove his love for us. Because we need a Savior who has a physical body like we do. Who has wounds like we do – even though ours may not always be visible. We need a Savior who overcame death to show us that this is not the end. To show us that death does not have the last word. To show us that there is something more. To show us the extent of God's love.

When Jesus said to the disciples, "you are witnesses of these things," he was also speaking to us. It is in witnessing the Risen Christ through the experiences of the disciples that we come to know the Risen Christ. It is in witnessing to the presence of the Risen Christ in our own lives that we, too, are able to become witnesses to his death and Resurrection. Witnesses to his power to bring salvation and new life. And through our witness, others will also come to know the glorious power of the Risen Christ.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!  
*(The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!)*