

Sunday, April 18, 2021
Third Sunday of Easter (Year B)

Luke 24.36b-48

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/545721343080217>

(Sermon begins at about 18:45)

“You Are Witnesses to These Things”

The disciples “were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost” (Lk 24.37). It’s no wonder. I mean, Jesus had just died. And it had been a long day and the disciples were still trying to process what had happened the last few days. They were still trying to process what happen today. They had only just found his tomb empty that morning. In Luke’s telling, this is the first encounter the disciples have with the Risen Lord—occurring on the evening of the Day of Resurrection. The women at the tomb do not see the Risen Jesus—they are told by a couple of angels that he has risen. Then on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his companion have an encounter with a stranger. But they only realize after the fact that the stranger they had been traveling with was none other than the Risen Christ. When Cleopas and his companion rush back to Jerusalem to inform the other disciples what has happened, they are told “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” (Lk 24.34). Even though we have no details of how Jesus appeared to Simon Peter. So, while the Risen Christ appeared to several people, this was the first time that he had appeared to all the disciples at once. And, naturally, they are a little freaked. Even though they knew he had been raised. Even though some of their number had already experienced the Risen Christ. But then again, grief will do that to you. Your whole world is turned upside down, to the point that you can’t think straight. And in this case, how could they think straight? They were devastated by the brutal death of their friend and teacher. And now, he’s appearing to select individuals? That completely defies the understanding of death. No wonder they are freaked.

Despite being freaked out, and contrary to conventional wisdom to allow grief to run its course, the disciples really do need to snap out of it. Which is sort of the point of today’s Gospel reading. The point of Jesus’ appearance to the disciples and particularly the exchange he has with them. Jesus’ mission must continue. But before it can, the disciples need to understand what has happened. They have proclaimed “the Lord has risen indeed,” but as of yet, do not fully comprehend what that means. Then again, do we fully comprehend what it means when we say “Alleluia, Christ is Risen!” and respond with “The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!”?

Let’s take a look at what happens in this one and only appearance Jesus makes to his disciples following his Resurrection. At least, as far as Luke’s reporting goes. The other Gospels report multiple post-resurrection appearances, but Luke only reports the encounters on the Day of Resurrection, and immediately follows this encounter with the Ascension. But there is a lot packed into this one post-resurrection encounter.

Jesus seeks to address the disciples’ fears and doubts—that they think Jesus is a ghost as opposed to a resurrected being. Which is understandable. Even though Jesus had told them he would be raised up, no one knew what that looked like. So, this was all very new to them. The

way he seeks to ease their fears, to eliminate their doubts, as quite simple. “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” (Lk 24.39). In making this offer, Jesus is not only providing verification that he is indeed Jesus by showing them the wounds of his crucifixion. He is also showing them that he is not some disembodied spirit, a ghost. Rather, that he is very much a physical being. They are starting to understand. They are starting to realize that this is indeed the Risen Lord. And then he asks them, “Have you anything to eat?” (Lk 24.41). Which may seem like an odd thing to ask. Which may seem like a strange request for a being who is dead and presumably no longer needs sustenance. But here again, this is all part of helping the disciples understand who he is and what all this resurrection stuff means. And what better way than sharing a meal with them. After all, they had shared plenty of meals with Jesus over the last three years. Jesus did some of his best work during meals. And, quite simply, what better demonstration of his physicality than to do what is regularly required of physical beings—to eat?

This encounter is designed to demonstrate in no uncertain terms the fact that Jesus, although resurrected, still has physical form. But why is that so important? What would be wrong with the resurrected Jesus being a spirit, a ghost?

In short, symmetry. Or maybe more aptly, consistency. Particularly for Luke, it was important to tell what happens to make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that the disciples did not have some sort of delusional or ecstatic vision, but actually saw, touched, and interacted with the Risen Christ. Therefore, Luke’s account of the disciples’ experience of the Resurrected Christ was about affirming who Jesus was and what his life—and what his death—was all about.

Who was Jesus in the first place? The Son of God. Emmanuel, God with us. God in the flesh. That is what the birth narrative, only recorded in Luke’s Gospel, so aptly demonstrates. That God loved humanity so much, that God wanted to be in face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh relationship, that God came to be among us in human form. Taking on physical form, just as we are physical. Perhaps more than any other Gospel, the Gospel according to Luke emphasizes the Incarnation. From first to last. Beginning with the birth narrative, recounting his earthly ministry in very physical terms, culminating with the death of his physical body. But then, there is the twist. That dead human body is taken off the cross and placed in a tomb. But then, three days later, the tomb is empty. The body is gone. Which should have been a clue in and of itself. Dead bodies do not just disappear. But when Jesus does appear resurrected—to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, to the disciples later that same day—it is in physical form. This is significant. Demonstrating that even death could not end Christ’s physical existence. Even death could not end God’s face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh relationship with his people.

Sure, a lot of other cool things happened as a result of Christ’s Resurrection. Sin and death were destroyed in the process. All our sins have been forgiven. Death is no longer the end. We have the promise of eternal life. All of that is pretty awesome. Intangible things, but awesome, nonetheless. But even more awesome is what is represented by the ongoing physical presence of Christ post-resurrection. That the intimacy of our relationship with God that was only made possible through God Incarnate, through Jesus’ life among us, transcends death—his and ours. That our relationship with God never ends. That God’s love for us never ends. That God continues to come among us, to be with us.

The encounter in today's Gospel ends with the resurrected Jesus taking one more opportunity to teach his disciples. Reminding them of what it is they are to do. "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24.46-48). The demonstration of his physicality, followed by the familiar act of him teaching, went a long way in helping the disciples to move from an inward focus to an outward focus. From the inward focus on their own fear of what they had initially thought to be a ghost. Of their inward focus on their own fear about what would happen to them now that their leader and teacher was gone. Shifting to an outward focus on continuing the mission and ministry that Jesus had begun. Shifting to an outward focus on proclaiming the good news of the Resurrection, along with what that means in terms of forgiveness and new life.

Confronted with the reality of Christ's Resurrection, the disciples were able to experience a resurrection of their own. While a part of them died with the crucifixion of their master, experiencing the Risen Christ in the flesh, as a physical body just as he had in life, just as they had, allowed them to rise to a new life of ministry in his name. But not just in his name. Through their experience of the Resurrected Christ, they themselves became the Body of Christ. They became the embodiment of what Jesus represented and worked for in his life and what he continues to represent and work for through his death and Resurrection. I don't know that this would have—that this could have—happened without that final flesh-to-flesh encounter of them seeing Christ's wounds, of them being able to touch his body, of them sharing a meal with the Resurrected One.

Today, we commonly use the term "Body of Christ" to describe the Church, to describe those of us who follow Christ. This is by design. The Body of Christ is the ongoing physical embodiment of the Resurrected Christ. The physical continuation of what Christ came to accomplish. And still accomplishes through his Body the Church. For we stand in continuity with the disciples, who stood in continuity with Jesus. We are linked to God's redemptive work that began with the Incarnation, that continued through the life and ministry of Jesus, that culminated in his death and Resurrection. Linked through our own lives, our own experiences, our own ministries. Professing to be the Body of Christ is a profound statement of faith that emphasizes in no uncertain terms that we have experienced that redemptive work. That we have been recipients of and have experienced in tangible ways God's love. A love that was only made possible through Christ's death and Resurrection. That just as the disciples took on Christ's mantle following their experience of the Resurrected Lord, we too take on that mantle. Just as the Risen Christ commissioned the disciples to "proclaim his name to all nations," we are likewise commissioned to proclaim in word and deed what we have experienced in our own lives. Because when it comes to experiencing the love of God through Christ, when it comes to experiencing the profound joy of being forgiven, saved, and given new life, just like the disciples, we are witnesses to these things.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!