

Sunday, April 15, 2018
3rd Sunday of Easter

Rev. Robert W. Brown
SERMON
The Questioning Believer

SCRIPTURE READING – Luke 24:36-48

INTRODUCTION:

There are many resurrection appearances in the 4 Gospels. A recurring theme in all of them is how the early Christian community struggles to perceive and believe. When Jesus appears in his resurrected form, he isn't even recognized at first. In the Gospel of John, Mary thinks he's the local gardener, and later, the disciples don't recognize him on the beach.¹ And likewise, just before this week's passage in Luke, two of Jesus' followers have an extended conversation with Jesus **about** his crucifixion as they walk together on the road to Emmaus but they have no clue who he is! Perhaps this suggests that resurrection means something **more** mysterious than simple resuscitation: Jesus is risen, and at the same time he is somehow different. As you listen to Luke's account of how the disciples respond when Jesus stands among them, think about how you would react.

The Gospel of Luke Chapter 24 verses 36 through 48.

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### SCRIPTURE:

#### *Jesus Appears to His Disciples*

Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:15; 21:4

and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them. Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

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May God open our minds to understand this good news of the Gospel.

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If you spend much time in San Francisco or Los Angeles, sooner or later you will experience an earthquake. It is totally disorienting. You have no experience to process the reality of the earth moving that way. The seismic shift is so much bigger than anything you can imagine. I am pretty sure, seeing Jesus was kind of an earthquake moment for the disciples. Luke tells us that they really couldn't believe what they were seeing. It was too much; it did not fit into any category of reality they had ever experienced. So Jesus gives them an anchor point set firmly in their reality. "Have anything to eat?" They give him a piece of leftover fish. It's kind of like giving him a slice of last night's cold pizza. He takes it and eats it. Can you imagine how awkward that room was with Jesus just chewing on a piece of fish while the disciples gape at him in stunned silence? How would you react? The disciples, we're told, still found joy and hope even in disbelief? Can we?

Please pray with me.

*God of all mercy and endless loving-kindness, help us navigate through our disbelief and show us a deeper truth. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen*

Nearly every week at TriCon Church we offer extravagant and often wordy words of welcome. We do this because in this tradition of the United Church of Christ we notice that Jesus never turned anyone away. He never tested the orthodoxy of that hemorrhaging woman before healing her. He never asked the leper if he believed in virgin birth or the physical resurrection of the body. He just went about healing the sick and feeding the hungry. He loved people with a sweeping abandon across all boundaries and borders. Doubters, questioners and questioning believers were all welcomed and encouraged to experience the

primacy of God's immense and far-reaching love. Jesus showed us, through his actions and behavior, that there is great power in a faith that receives and then reflects God's loving-kindness and mercy.

In this post-enlightenment, modern world, most people think that having faith is to blindly believe in a deity that is in total conflict with what we observe in science and our own physical experience. The material world is what we know while the spiritual realm is theoretical and abstract. We all know that Walden Pond exists, but God, maybe not so much. Many people think that faith means that we must be completely convinced of God's existence, like Walden Pond, in order for it to be real. I don't think so. In fact, I believe that questioners, doubters, and questioning believers can be the heroes of faith when they are compelled to find true meaning and purpose in life. I think that true faith is a way of behaving more than believing; it is something you actually do more than something you think or believe. Often the greater your doubt the more daring your faith is because you somehow keep trusting that love will win out even when it seems that all morality, compassion, and human integrity is circling the drain. People of faith will still show up anyway and relentlessly work toward making real the prevailing goodness, a goodness that is far beyond their own capacity.

Last August, for instance, here in Concord, in response to the repulsive uprising of white supremacists in North Carolina, a handful of concerned people organized a "Vigil Against Hate" on Monument Square. The green was packed that summer night with people of all ages, races, creeds, and socio/economic standing. Together we affirmed the power of love over hate and lifted our candles in one common accord while singing Leonard Cohan's great anthem, *Alleluia*. This was a faith far beyond any religion. In that holy space I witnessed the synergy of the spiritual with the physical reality. Something bigger, beyond our own individual capacity to believe was affirmed as foundational truth.

To identify as a Christian, is not to proclaim a blind faith in virgin birth and resurrected bodies, simply because of some orthodoxy or catechism taught to us to believe this when we were just school children. To be a follower in the Way of Jesus is to study this Gospel and the sacred texts as a guidebook for life and find meaning beyond our doubts, to live on the other side of disbelief. To study the scripture story is how you come to understand a single slice of how God views you and your place in all of humanity. Without grappling with what you can believe or not believe, anyone can easily see that all we are to do is truly care about our neighbor, because that's what Jesus consistently did. We are to welcome back home our wayward, self-entitled children. We are to show compassion to oppressed sex workers, gang members, and tax collectors, offering healing and

liberation. We are to bestow healthcare to aids patients, children, single parents and the elderly. We are to welcome the refugee, the stranger and lift up the lowly. We are to be healed ourselves of the dark blindness that masks our culpability in the world's injustice.

When we simply yield to the experience of God's grace for the disenfranchised and every bit as much for us, our only response is to freely and eagerly, with total abandon, dispense forgiveness and grace to others.

You see, faith is not some weak and pitiful self-help emotion. Faith is a durable and dynamic confidence built on the idea that God is Holy Love and Holy Love will endure beyond our questioning, believing or understanding.

Jesus appeared to them. He showed his wounds, swallowed day old fish, and showed us how the material and spiritual realities blend as one, beyond beliefs, beyond questions and beyond questioning believers. His resurrection appearances proclaim the good news of the Gospel. In this space and in this time, we truly matter to God and "*the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [God's] name to all nations.*"

For those who have eyes to see, we are his witnesses and, in the end, the truth of resurrection has nothing to do with your correct belief. Resurrection is the continual process that we can only observe happening all around us, over and over again. All we can do is respond in wonder and amazement as an Easter people, whose song is alleluia.