

Sunday, April 18, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

**SERMON**  
*Joyful Disbelief*

INTRODUCTION

Following that first Easter morning, after Mary Magdalen was stunned to come face to face with the risen Christ, scripture records over a dozen more instances of astounded eyewitnesses who encountered Jesus in the flesh. Last week we looked at John's Gospel account of the time Jesus suddenly appeared to his disciples who were hiding out, behind locked doors. That's when Thomas received his unfortunate legacy of forever being defined as "doubting" Thomas. (I'll bet that's not all he was.) Today we look at Luke's version and get a different perspective of Jesus appearing to his disciples. As we re-enter the story, two men have come rushing in to the hide out. They excitedly report that the Lord has really risen from the dead. They have just broken bread with him on the road to Emmaus!

Listen to Luke's account of what happens next as if you too were in the room. How do you feel when Jesus is suddenly is in your midst? What questions or doubts come to mind? How might you react in this situation?

This is the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 24, verses 36 through 49.

**SCRIPTURE**

**Luke 24:36-49** (The Message)

While they were saying all this, Jesus appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you." They thought they were seeing a ghost and were scared half to death. He continued with them, "Don't be upset, and don't let all these doubting questions take over. Look at my hands; look at my feet—it's really me. Touch me. Look me over from head to toe. A ghost doesn't have muscle and bone like this." As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. They still couldn't believe what they were seeing. It was too much; it seemed too good to be true. He asked, "Do you have any food here?" They gave him a piece of leftover fish they had cooked. He took it and ate it right before their eyes. Then he said, "Everything I told you while I was with you comes to this: All the things written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms have to be fulfilled."

He went on to open their understanding of the Word of God, showing them how to read their Bibles this way. He said, "You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations—starting from here, from Jerusalem! You're the first to hear and see it. You're the witnesses. What comes next is very important: I am sending what my Father promised to you, so stay here in the city until he arrives, until you're equipped with power from on high."

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PLEASE PRAY WITH ME;

*Lord Jesus Christ, the light of your love shines on,  
illuminating the places where you are present.  
As the bewildered disciples pondered the stories of your appearance,  
you penetrated the darkness of their fear and doubt  
with your word of peace.  
You showed them the appalling marks of evil  
pierced on your hands and feet.  
You opened their minds to understand  
why you had to die to defeat such evil and death.  
Increase our understanding, this morning,  
and open our minds and hearts to receive your truth.  
Speak your word of peace to us  
and let your love shine on any dark areas in our lives.  
Come Holy Spirit, Come. And, may my words and the meditation of all our hearts  
be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN*

You might notice that in all of these early sightings of the risen Christ, every one of the people who encounter him understandably experience a similar reaction. They are bewildered, astonished, emotional and confused. This is quite normal. Today, psychologists have a name for this experience. It's called, "cognitive dissonance." Cognitive dissonance is when two contradictory realities clash and the mind struggles to resolve the contradiction. "Wait! I saw him die on the cross and now he is standing right in front of me, alive and breathing?" When your fixed understanding of what is real and possible is undeniably challenged, it is an uncomfortable disorientation, to say the least. The normal reaction to such events is to quickly rationalize it, reorder and somehow harmonize your thoughts. So, when Jesus appears to his disciples, they scramble to make sense of it. He must be a spirit of some kind. But that doesn't sit well because never, on even one of those paranormal reality shows, does a ghost show up saying, "Peace be with you." or "I'm famished! What do have to eat around here." It's almost comical to me how Jesus tries to help them restore their blown minds.

He shows them his wounded hands and feet, but I don't imagine that cleared anything up in their whirling heads. In fact, Luke reports that the disciples were *joyous* in their *disbelief* and still wondering. I'll bet they were! The contradicting realities between their lived experience and what they saw with their own eyes could not be easily be rationalized. On one hand, it was so astonishingly wonderful to see Jesus in the flesh, but on the other, it was impossible.

On some level, we have all had this disorienting feeling before. I remember when we were rehabbing our house in Maynard. One evening I came home and went in to the kitchen. Immediately I noticed that the flat, white metal door leading to the garage had somehow become a 3-dimensional stained wood door that perfectly matched the style and stain of our new cabinets. I knew for certain that the door was flat and metal, but my eyes saw contoured wood! I actually became a bit dizzy. I couldn't make rational sense of it. Slowly I approached the door with disbelief. It wasn't until I



actually stroked my hand over the surface that I discovered a remarkable optical illusion. My wife Natalie had painted this *Trompe-l'oeil* with exceptional skill and precision. Even from a foot away the illusion of a wood door was utterly convincing. In order to resolve the tension and discomfort in my head and body, I had to see the door differently. I had to get close enough to open my mind to a different reality other than the one I was so very certain was true.

It must have been completely baffling for the disciples and everyone else who encountered the resurrected Jesus to perceive and believe in a new way. Their joyous disbelief and wonder had to be resolved before their head exploded. There was a choice to make. Run away from the discomfort or lean in and get close.

So, in between bites of leftover fish, Jesus helps them regain their stability. He takes them through all the scriptures written by the prophets and psalms concerning the Messiah. He patiently unveils the mysteries imbedded in scripture. All of God's promises about sending a savior to redeem the whole world have been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. For those who got close and were willing to hear, Jesus helped to reorient their thinking and realign a broader reality. These scriptures had been around for thousands of years, but Jesus connected the dots into a new pattern to reveal a completely different picture than the one they thought was the absolute truth. Jesus opened up their minds to a radical new way of understanding God. He began to resolve their cognitive dissonance, but it would take even more to sustain a faith that can endure beyond what we think we know to be true. It is our nature to want to understand fully and believe completely.

But the truth is that the mystery of God's ways has always confounded human beings. And when you think about it, the mystery of God should always spark uncomfortable cognitive dissonance. To read the Gospel is to continually struggle to make sense of who Jesus was, what he meant, and how we might respond to his message today. Can we love our enemy? Is it actually right to turn the other cheek or forgive with

abandon, or humbly accept our innocent suffering? Is it right to give your life for the sake of another? Do we really gain our life when we lose it? This is all cognitive dissonance!

We have great difficulty melding the physical with the spiritual, especially in our postmodern world. We are increasingly troubled and impatient with the disorienting clash between faith and doubt. We tend to think that to have faith is to be totally convinced that God exists in the same way we are convinced that a table exists. WE crave certainty. That's why so many people who cannot prove the certainty of God's existence think that faith in God is impossible for them. But I don't agree with that at all. In fact, I have found that people who doubt can engage a great faith because faith is simply being open to a different way of seeing things, a different approach toward thinking about reality. Faith is an expansive freedom to never be closed to any possibility. It is only our fixed convictions that limits us.

The opposite of faith is not doubt, it's certainty; where there is certainty there is actually no room for faith. If we become certain in our faith or our rejection of faith, we constrain our curiosity and limit ability to grow. Also, certainty about God and God's ways actually diminishes God. To have faith in what I think of as God is to be in an active and perennial struggle that will never attain absolute, certain understanding. If I could do that, I would serve a very small God. A strong faith, however, allows for, even encourages us to doubt, to notice the contradictions and wrestle out the meaning. It is faith that gives us the courage to sit comfortably in the tension of paradox and the discomfort of our doubt until our hearts and minds become opened and a new understanding comes into view. Doubt is, in fact, what propels us beyond the illusion of certainty and is the catalyst for meaningful spiritual growth. In my experience, the greater your doubt the more HEROIC your faith.

Frederick Buechner puts it perfectly when he writes, "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." (Wishful Thinking).

I think many people today don't want those ants in their pants. They are so quickly annoyed and easily exhausted by this difficult paradox. They simply reject the spiritual mysteries of God all together. I don't blame them. If I could just dismiss the spiritual realm as a fantasy delusion for the weak-minded, the tension created by doubt will be quickly relieved. If I just turned away from Natalie's door and refused to look at it or never got close enough to see it, the problem would have gone away, but I also would have missed the joy found in my disbelief. Sometimes I wish I could dismiss the struggle between faith and doubt, but it doesn't work for me. The big existential questions won't leave me alone. Why are we here? Where does beauty come from? How is it that this amazing cosmos can be organized into such exquisite balance? And, why do we tend to hate so easily when love so powerful?

Those who witnessed the stunning appearance of Jesus after he had been dead and buried, were reeling in uncertainty. Nothing made sense or added up. Realities clashed and the discomfort of unknowing sent them spinning. Yet, “in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” Still wondering is an indispensable element of a healthy, growing faith. A still-wondering-faith is an open faith that allows for the fact that God is always revealing something new to us. The mystery of God is not something that is forever unknowable. The mysteries of God are infinitely knowable. We will never plumb the depths of God any more than we will reach the end of science. The mysteries of God are infinitely unfolding as humanity develops and learns through time, technology, science and the willingness to always question what you think you know. It is only certainty that freezes faith and diminishes the vastness of God. An active faith is a faith that trusts in the God who is always enticing us into to a wider reality, a deeper understanding of the seen and the unseen. May our doubts forever grow alongside our faith, a doubting faith that entirely trusts that, in the end, love will always recalibrate our disordered understanding and continually astound us with wonder. May we all know the joy in our disbelief. AMEN