

April 18, 2021

Luke 24: 36b-48

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Dispelling Doubt, Awaking Witness”

I’ve decided I like books. Let me clarify what I mean, as I’m not suggesting at my age I have suddenly discovered the joy of reading. Reading books has been with me for a long time. I say I’ve decided I like books in the sense that I prefer the physical “hold-it-in-your-hand” book with pages, and a binder, and a cover, as opposed to an electronic version by way of some e-reader on a digital device. It’s “old school” but reading actual printed words on paper, turning the pages, and folding down the corner to mark my place helps me feel connected to whatever I’m reading. A virtual book doesn’t do that for me. I’ve got the entire bible on my cell phone. This is great and it’s wonderfully convenient to look up a scripture passage on the go. But when it comes to reflecting on what I’m reading in the bible, looking at the larger context of the other words that connect to the passage, and even just leafing through the pages to see what may open, there’s nothing that can replace the “I’m touching it with my hands” kind of book. Look, I’m not knocking technology. I’m very fond of it, to tell the truth. It’s just that there are some things in our lives that are so much better when they are real.

As we move through these weeks that follow our recent celebration of Easter, we consider the impact of the resurrection of Christ in our lives. I’ve said it this way before but I don’t think it can be overstated. Resurrection is not an event. Resurrection is an experience. We get that, right? Resurrection isn’t the church celebrating something that happened back in history as much as it is responding to what God is doing right now in our lives and in our world. Think about it this way. Easter is connected to eggs and so let’s think about the proverbial problem of putting all our eggs in one basket. If Easter is just about that one day or only about the memory of what happened on that one Sunday morning when the first Jesus followers went to the empty tomb, we limit Easter’s power. One day comes and goes, and we move on assuming nothing has changed in our lives. If, on the other hand, we think of Easter as an ongoing experience then resurrection happens all around us. God is creating life out of death now and a risen Jesus walks with us and talks with us so that our lives will be shaped by resurrection power. To be sure, resurrection is a spiritual reality, but it is not a nebulous, wispy, or imaginary thing. The resurrection is real and the gospel writer, Luke, by way of our reading for today, wants us to embrace this reality, to hold it and to touch it, and to feel its hold and touch upon us.

It is dramatic the way Luke’s Gospel points us toward the physical reality of what God is doing through Jesus. Not meaning to confuse our holidays but to underscore an important theological truth, remember with me that Luke’s Gospel gives us the beautiful Christmas story of the birth of Jesus in the Bethlehem manger. One of the endearing images we have from that story is Mary, the mother of Jesus, cradling the baby in her arms. This is the savior of the world. This birth caused choirs of angels to break forth in song. This is God Almighty and the Prince of Peace, and yet Luke presents this eternal glory of Christ through the gentle embrace of a mother with child. Christ is real. Christ can be held. According to Luke, to believe what God is doing in Jesus is to find one’s self in the physical presence of God. This gospel is a “hold-it-in-your hands” kind of truth.

We see Luke’s emphasis on the physical experience of resurrection in the way he tells us about the appearances of Jesus at the end of his gospel. The disciples are gathered in a room in the city of Jerusalem when Jesus stands among them saying, “Peace be with you.” Not surprisingly, the disciples are paralysed with fear. One thing is for certain, fear is always looking for a way to cancel out faith. The resurrected Jesus knows exactly what we need. Already wrapping the scene with peace, Jesus says, “I am not a ghost.” He is real. He shows them his hands and feet. Jesus says to them, “Touch me and see...” (Luke 24:39) Resurrection is God’s answer to our fear. Resurrection wants us to touch, and hold, and embrace a new reality. The disciples are transformed by it. They change from a fearful group huddled in an undisclosed room into a community that will take the witness of the gospel into the world. Resurrection makes a difference. A “hold-it-in-your hands” resurrection changes fear into faith and makes a timid gathering become a confident community that spreads the good news nothing - not brokenness, not worry, not even death - is beyond God’s ability to bring new life and hope.

Many in our church have commented on how much they have appreciated the altar scene here in our sanctuary on Easter morning. We had a lovely display of spring flowers cascading from the table to the floor and all of it focused on the stunning cross, built with dried and dead sticks, which became the beautiful backdrop for more glorious flowers. That resurrection cross is still on display in the corner of our chancel area. Isn’t it beautiful? Here’s a secret that you may already know. The flowers on that cross are not real. Oh, they are beautiful but they aren’t real. Does that mean the resurrection isn’t real? Is the good news that “He lives!” fake in the way those flowers are never going to die because they are just an illusion? Of course not. This cross and the flowers that wrap it are a symbol that point to what is real. All of our Easter symbols do that: butterflies breaking out of cocoons, the fresh growth of spring after the hard winter, and the sun rising at the start of day, all of these are symbols of the real ways the

resurrection impacts our lives. Luke would want us to be inspired by the beauty of our cross, but even more, he wants us to encounter the power of a risen Jesus in our lives.

The words Jesus speaks to the disciples name an important experience that connects us to him. That experience is forgiveness. This is where we touch resurrection power. When the disciples move from fear to witnessing for God in the world the message they are to carry is God's forgiveness for sin. In another place, Jesus teaches that forgiveness is not just what God does for us but what God makes possible in us. God forgives and we are to forgive one another in the same way. Receiving and offering forgiveness is experiencing the power of resurrection. It is new life. To receive or offer forgiveness is to move through some aspect of a relationship that feels dead and to experience life and hope where there was none. There is no limit to the ways we are touched by the power of the resurrection. Forgiveness is one way we hold the power of resurrection in our hands and offer that blessing to someone else. Where can forgiveness make a difference in your life? Jesus is ready to meet you there with resurrection power.

Of course, Luke doesn't want us to just say the words, "You are forgiven." Luke wants us to experience the power. Take hold of that this week, and may the path of forgiveness bring you and the one you forgive new life.