

“Doubtful Witnesses”

Luke 24:36-48

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Jesus himself stood among [the disciples] and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 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.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

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, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “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.”

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Last week in the Passages adult Sunday School class, we spent some time exploring the four gospel accounts of the resurrection. We had a great conversation, and one of the things we learned during our discussion is that we have a tendency with some of the more familiar stories of Scripture to remember them in a particular way that may or may not match up with how they're actually told in the Bible. Often there are details that we forget, or if a story is told more than once, we might conflate multiple versions into one story, which is what often happens with the story of Jesus' resurrection.

All four gospels include an account of Jesus' burial and resurrection, and each gospel tells it a little differently. A few examples:

Jesus' burial – in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus' body by himself. The Gospel of John, however, has Nicodemus there to help Joseph.

On the morning of the third day, all four gospels have Mary Magdalene going to the tomb, but each gospel has a different group of people going with her. In Matthew, "the other Mary" is with Mary Magdalene, and in Mark, Mary the mother of James and Salome go with her.

What happens at the tomb on that third day varies as well. According to Matthew, there's an earthquake and then angels appear to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. In Mark's account, a young man in white sits inside the tomb, and John says the tomb is empty when Peter and the beloved disciple peer inside and then has an angel appear when Mary looks in the tomb.

All of these details and little nuances serve a particular purpose for each gospel writer in sharing the story of Jesus' resurrection with a particular community. The writers want to tell the story in a way that will help their community most fully

understand the significance of the event, so they include specific details that will be especially meaningful to their audience.

If we want to put together a definitive account of what exactly happened that morning, the best strategy is to look for what's consistent between the four gospels. If we do that, we know a few things for sure: (1) Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus, (2) Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb on the morning of the third day, (3) the tomb is empty, and (4) at least one angel is present and tells Mary that Jesus isn't there.

All of that probably sounds pretty standard to you, but there's one more commonality among the gospels that we don't always think about when we tell the Resurrection story: doubt. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all report that at least one person (if not multiple people) don't believe that Jesus is risen.

Our Gospel this morning – Luke – doesn't want us to miss this fact, so he includes three separate events when people doubt the news of Jesus' resurrection. First, it's the disciples who think the women are out of their minds when they come back from the tomb with the message that Jesus isn't there. Then it's the disciples on the road to Emmaus who take forever to recognize Jesus as the stranger walking with them. And finally it's the group of disciples we read about this morning who struggle to believe when Jesus is standing right in front of them.

In all four of the gospels, it's not just anybody who doubts; it's the disciples – the people who are the closest to Jesus. They've seen him perform miracles and heard him say that he will die and be raised from the dead. At this point in Luke, the disciples have seen Jesus and touched his hands and feet to know that it's really him. They've even seen him eat – something that a spirit or ghost wouldn't be able to do – and still they

doubt and question. The people who have every reason to believe the Resurrection are the first ones to doubt it.

The gospel writers could've left this detail out. It doesn't make the disciples look very good, and it certainly would've been more convincing if everyone readily believed. Even so, all four writers mention doubters.

This is huge, y'all.

Somewhere along the way, doubt got a bad rap. We got this idea in our heads that being faithful means not having any questions about God or Jesus or the Bible or the resurrection. We accepted this idea that we should believe all of these things without question, and if we do have questions, then something must be wrong with us. People have stayed away from the church because they think that if they have doubts, there's no room for them here.

And yet – Scripture tells us that the most common reaction to the central event of the Christian faith – the resurrection – is doubt. People who are willing to admit their doubts are more like the earliest followers of Jesus than people who claim not to have any questions.

Think about that for a second.

Does it surprise you? It did me. But why is it so surprising?

If the resurrection story doesn't give us pause and make us ask some questions about our faith and the world as we know it, then we're not paying attention. Because let's be real. The story sounds crazy. It's not normal for a person to die and be buried and then come back to life three days later. That's not how things are supposed to work;

it's definitely not how the natural world works, so why are we surprised when the disciples aren't sure about it?

I wonder about your own doubting disciple moments. Most of us have had plenty of experiences that make the promises of new life, grace, forgiveness, and second chances that we're given in the resurrection seem far-fetched. We've had our hearts broken over the death of someone we love. We read the newspaper and hear of story after story of violence, injustice, and devastation. Expectations that we've had for our lives have fallen flat, and the relationships we thought were invincible have fallen apart.

Questioning and doubting aren't reserved for seasons of significant loss or change either.

Have you ever had a conversation with someone – maybe at work or at school or at a cocktail party – about why you go to church or what you believe? (Maybe not because we're not supposed to talk about religion in polite company...) And maybe the other person says, "I just don't know if I could believe that whole resurrection thing" or "that whole virgin birth thing," and then it's your turn to speak. It doesn't take long for you to sound like you're talking nonsense.

I say this from personal experience of talking with friends who don't go to church. Several years ago when the TV show *LOST* was in its final season, a good friend who doesn't care much about church asked me about the religious symbolism in the show.

So the bread is supposed to be Jesus' body?

Yes and no. It's symbolic and it's real at the same time.

And the cup of juice or wine is Jesus' blood?

Well, yes, but no. It's a reminder of God's promise to us and a reminder that Jesus is really present with us.

And eating that tiny cube of bread and drinking that miniature cup of juice does what exactly?

At this point in the conversation, I know I sound ridiculous. What I'm saying, what we as a community profess to believe doesn't always makes sense, and that can be disconcerting in a culture that likes reason and logic.

So here's the beautiful (and admittedly sometimes vexing) thing: Faith isn't about making sense, and it's not about certainty. In fact, certainty is the opposite of faith. David Lose, the president of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, offers this reminder: "Faith, by definition, is trust in spite of a lack of evidence. Faith is not knowledge. Faith is more tension-filled."¹

I want you to hear that last sentence again: "Faith is more tension-filled."

Remember that verse from our reading today? ..."In [the disciples'] joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." Another translation says, "they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness" (CEB). Doubt in the midst of happiness, hope in the midst of loss, trust in the midst of uncertainty – this is what the life of faith looks like.

It seems to me there's a kind of permission-giving happening in this Scriptural acknowledgement and naming of doubt. It means that we don't have to check our minds at the door when we walk into the sanctuary, and we don't have to pretend like we don't have questions. It also means that we're freed from concerning ourselves with

finding evidence to prove our faith and freed to live as though the promises of the resurrection are really true.

These promises have become familiar to us in the same way that the well-known stories of Scripture are familiar – we know them, but we don't always remember them correctly or they've become so familiar that we've forgotten how incredible they are.

“So what if it's true that God raised Jesus from the dead...

What if it's true that God promises to renew the whole creation and give us new life...

What if it's true that nothing – nothing we've done or has been done to us – can separate us from the love of God...

What if it's true that God won't turn God's back on any of us but will reach out to us in grace, mercy, and forgiveness over and over again...

If any of these promises – let alone all of them – are true, what does that mean for us? How would we live our lives differently? And not just differently in general, but differently this here and now, today, and this week? How might this faith – not knowledge but trusting, courageous faith – change how we look at our relationships and our politics and our work and our resources and our future?”ⁱⁱ

Would you be less fearful? Would you be quicker to encourage your child or a co-worker? Would you pay more attention to the beautiful things in your life? Would you

be more generous with what you have? Would you love yourself and your neighbor as God already loves you? Would you spend your time differently?

Sisters and brothers, that's the Easter challenge to the community of faith: to live as though God is already fulfilling the promises made to God's children.

If that sounds difficult to you, you're in good company...starting with the earliest disciples. The fact that you're here though suggests that however big the challenge seems or however nagging your doubts are, the Holy Spirit is working on you in a bigger way.

This is incredibly good news. It's almost as incredible as the good news of the Resurrection, and it's our good news to live into and to share. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ David Lose, "Resurrection Doubts," *In the Meantime* website, April 13, 2015

ⁱⁱ *ibid*