

"Too Good to Be True?" – April 19, 2015

Luke 24:36b-48; Acts 3:12-19

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On this third Sunday of Easter we are still trying to understand what the resurrection means for us. Last week we looked at the episode in John's gospel where Jesus appeared to Thomas. Due to his uncertainty Thomas had earned for himself in church tradition the unfortunate nickname "Doubting Thomas," even though he wasn't the only one who had some doubts about Jesus' resurrection. When Jesus came to Thomas, and Thomas could see him in the flesh, he cried out, "My Lord and My God." At the end of that passage Jesus told Thomas and all the disciples "Blessed are those who have not seen me, yet still believe." That was said for the benefit of all of us who came later. For us who never had the experience of walking and talking with Jesus, face to face. For those of us who did not witness the agony of crucifixion, or the astonishment and fear of the empty tomb, or the wonder of witnessing the resurrected Christ.

Our faith, our believing in the Risen Christ comes by a different means. We don't have the luxury of standing in the presence of Jesus and asking him questions. It's harder for us to quell our doubts. What we believe is based on what we know from Scripture and what we have learned about Jesus through the teachings of the church and our traditions. Yet even those who did witness the Risen Christ had their own misgivings.

Today, our Gospel lesson from Luke comes immediately following the Emmaus Road story, where Jesus came upon two of his followers walking from Jerusalem to their village of Emmaus. They were discussing the events of the past few days. He walked with them and talked with them, and when they got to their village, they invited him inside to offer him a meal. When he broke the bread with them, they suddenly saw who he was, and they were astonished. Jesus disappeared from their sight, and the two disciples immediately rose and bolted back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven apostles what they had witnessed.

While they were recounting what they had experienced, Jesus appeared there in the room with them all, and this is where today's lesson begins – a story very similar to last week's lesson from John. Jesus told them, "Peace be with you," because they were terrified and startled. They thought he was a ghost. I imagine I'd probably have a similar reaction. It's not every day that someone you thought dead appeared there in your presence. Yet he quickly proved them wrong. He in fact wasn't a spirit, but indeed had flesh and bones. He bid them to come and look at his hands and at his side to see the wounds that had been inflicted upon him. He invited them to touch, to feel the flesh of his skin. He asked for some food, and he ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence so they would be convinced he was not a ghost.

And then Jesus reminded them of what he had told them before. Before his crucifixion he had predicted his death. He had told them that this would happen in order that the scriptures would be fulfilled. At the time it didn't make a lot of sense to them. And now on his day of resurrection, Jesus came to them and decided to sit down with his disciples and conduct a little Bible study. Previously Jesus had told them he would be resurrected, and now he tells them again, by his resurrection everything written in the books of Moses and the books of the Prophets and in the Psalms have found their fulfillment in him. It's almost as if Jesus understood the basics of a class in Public Speaking 101. The process of "Tell them what you're going to tell them. Then tell them. Then tell them what you just told them."

Jesus had told them prior to his death - all these things must occur for Scripture to be fulfilled. Then by his death and resurrection, he was actually showing them that fulfillment. And now in these post-resurrection experiences, he's telling them again what he already told them. Eventually they got the point, as we'll see in our passage from the Book of Acts.

But even at that very moment, they still weren't completely sure. There's one particular verse I'd like to point out. It reads, "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." I like the way Eugene Peterson translates this passage in his book *The Message*. He writes, "They still couldn't believe what they were seeing. It was too much; it seemed too good to be true." It was too much for them to take in. Too amazing, too shocking, too wonderful. Was it really happening? What if it was just some sort of communal hallucination? Or simply a dream that each would soon wake from?

I'm pretty sure this whole thing was unexpected. I mean, even though Jesus did tell them he would rise from the dead, I really struggle to believe that any of them actually gave any weight to that prediction. Sure, he had done some pretty amazing things during his ministry, but coming back from a Roman crucifixion? Did they really think that possible? Not so much.

And so here he was, standing before them, and they thought he was a ghost. It was just too mind boggling. Too incredible. But as we well know, their doubt did not remain. The church was born, and they began to proclaim Christ's message.

If we jump ahead in time and look at the passage from the Book of Acts, we stumble upon a mini-sermon being delivered by Peter. He and John had just completely healed a man who had been unable to walk since birth. In the name of Jesus, they stood before this man and told him to get up and walk, which he did, praising God the entire time. Well, this act

astonished many people who had known this man, and had seen him every day begging outside the Temple Gate. And the Bible tells us they were filled with wonder and amazement.

The man was clinging to Peter in joy, and the people all gathered around them. Then Peter launched into his message. He told them that it was God's power working through Jesus Christ that made this man walk. This same Jesus, said Peter, that you all handed over to the Romans to be crucified. He was pretty blunt about affixing the blame. He pointed out that he knew they had acted in ignorance as had the religious authorities. Peter himself had rejected and denied knowing Jesus when he was confronted. But Peter said, there was still time. They weren't completely condemned for their rejection of Christ. They still had an opportunity to repent and turn to the one who was the Redeemer.

There are a couple of points I'd like to make here. First, Jesus came back to the very ones who were guilty of deserting him and condemning him. His disciples had run away in fear, yet it was to them that the Risen Lord returned and commissioned them to proclaim the good news to everyone. And then here Peter is preaching to the very crowds who had turned on Jesus. They had acted in ignorance, he said, but they were given another chance. Jesus didn't go find some new group of people to try to start over with them. He came back to the ones who turned on him and who doubted him. These are the one to whom he gave his mission.

I think that says a lot. We don't have to be perfect. We don't have to be anywhere near perfect for God to still be able to use us for God's purposes in the world. The disciples and the converts who made up the early church were flawed human beings, yet God was still able to do amazing things through them.

And that brings me to the second point. After Peter and John healed the man from his inability to walk, Peter made sure that the crowds knew that was the power of God through Jesus Christ that had accomplished that amazing feat. It was not Peter's power. It was not John's power. It was God's power. Everything that we do when we reach out in love to our neighbors, as God calls us to do, is the power of God in Jesus Christ working through us. It is not us doing these things. It is not our power. It is Christ using us as his hands and feet.

That brings us to why we are here today – why we gather together as a church, a community of believers each Sunday. Part of the reason we gather is to learn what we're supposed to do next. How does this event of Jesus' resurrection impact our lives? How do we live out the resurrection in what we say and do? What difference does it really make? Where will we go from here? What is our vision for the future? And how do we get there?

In order for us to answer these questions, we must first be certain of our focus, our foundation. We can't go anywhere or pursue any goals unless Jesus Christ is at the center. Christ must be our foundation – the rock upon which we seek to build. And so we worship together, we study the Bible, we pray for direction, we grow with one another in our faith, and we stretch ourselves to serve others in ways that may at first feel uncomfortable.

And so our faith is central to anything and everything that we do. We look at these resurrection stories these past three Sundays, and we see that Christ fulfilled what he was sent here to do. In him, all things find their perfection, and through him, all things are possible. He truly is the beginning and the end of all things.

These resurrection stories also show us that it's okay to question, it's okay to doubt, and it's okay to not be perfect all the time. Like the disciples, we will turn from Jesus in doubt, and we will make many mistakes along the way. Jesus did not build his church with perfect people. He built his church with regular folks, with typical human flaws, who doubted their own faith even when Jesus stood directly in front of them and showed them his nail-scarred hands.

Our church has a mission – we have a calling. It is up to us to continually interpret that calling, to seek God's will, and to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit. And as we go out, each Sunday as we leave this place of gathering and worship, let us continue our journey forward, keeping our eyes focused on our Risen Lord. If we do that, everything else – everything else – will fall into place.