“Continuation”

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Luke 24:36b-48

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***John 24:36b-48***

***36While they were talking about this [Cleopas and another met Jesus on the road to Emmaus – Jesus appearing not just in Jerusalem], Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 37They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39Look 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.” 40And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” 42They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43and he took it and ate in their presence. 44Then 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.” 45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, “Thus it is written, [in Isaiah 50] that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things.***

Every single week, as I write my sermon, I find myself traveling down one black hole or another, absolutely fascinated by something that ends up in the sermon as one sentence – if that. Dragging myself up and out of these black holes takes great strength because the stuff I find is so interesting. And besides, that’s the actual definition of a black hole. They literally suck things into themselves.

I started by wondering why our weekly schedule of scripture texts to be used on Sundays, has us yet again, reading about Jesus appearing in a room that was locked. This is only the third Sunday of Easter, and already Jesus has appeared to a locked room full of disciples three times – twice in last Sunday’s text, and again here in today’s text. I try to enter the minds of the disciples and figure out why the texts describe them as kind of slow on the uptake. The disciples in today’s text were in the middle of a conversation about events that had just occurred on the road to Emmaus. The disciples had heard reports that Cleopas and another were on the road leading to Emmaus, and met a stranger who had seemingly not yet heard the news – that Jesus, the man everyone had hoped would be the Messiah, had actually been killed. Dead Messiah’s are not really Messiah’s. Cleopas and the other talked with the fellow traveler and discovered that it was actually Jesus, raised from the dead, speaking with them right there! The disciples were discussing this because if Cleopas’ report was right, it meant that Jesus was appearing to people beyond the city of Jerusalem. Jesus appeared among them then, and without them asking, Jesus showed them his hands and feet. Touch me, he says. I have flesh and bones just like you do. Scripture makes us think that the disciples should have said, “Oh, cool! Now I get it! Everything you said really is true.” But they didn’t. “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”

Enter black hole number one. The neuroscience of our brains as predictive memory making devices. Part of what our brains do when we take in information, is take in the raw data from our senses and rapidly compare it to anything from the past that our brain has previously catalogued. This is why we hold onto our disbelief for so long when we experience something new. Our brains, constantly saying, “recalculating.”

So Jesus gives them some more data. He eats. Real food. A body with flesh and bones and digestion. The disciples brains, and ours, bypassing that first assumption – this appearance of Jesus must be a ghost. Nope. Ghosts don’t eat.

“Recalculating.”

Jesus understands their confusion, their mixed joy, their disorientation. Jesus reminds them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you (like, with us/with us, not like now, when you are with us, but not with us?) – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Jesus used to say things like this before – there are lots of “it is written” words that Jesus has spoken, but he has always said, “it is written that *the Son of Man*…” or “it is written that *the Messiah* shall….” But in today’s text Jesus says, “it is written that everything written about *me*…” Jesus meets the disciples in a slightly deeper way every time. Here Jesus refers unequivocally to himself. These things were written about *me*.

“Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” Isn’t that something that we are all waiting for now too? What might it be like to understand the scriptures? Oh, sure we’ve all got some understanding of scripture, some much more than others, but not better or worse than others. Scripture plus our real lived lives = our understanding of scripture. It takes a lifetime. And like all good understanding, as we discussed last week, critical thinking is required for some of that understanding.

Matt Skinner, pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, primary contributor to Working Preacher, asks us an interesting question. What is our response when something we didn’t expect actually happens, even after we have already declared it? Scripture during the weeks after Easter take us through this time when the disciples have variously said, My Lord and My God, like Thomas; or “We have seen the Lord!” like the women at the tomb, and the disciples who first ran to the tomb and then back to tell the other disciples. And even the two on the road to Emmaus have declared “We have seen the Lord!” And yet, even after having declared that Jesus is Lord, the disciples were in their joy and disbelief still wondering.

There is tremendous awe in this Easter realization. How can we stay in that awe, and pose our unanswered questions?

The final line in today’s text, after Jesus has opened their minds to understand the scripture, Jesus said to them – and to us – you are witnesses of these things.

The gospel of Luke was written by the same author that wrote the book of Acts. Today’s text appears at the very end of the gospel of Luke, and the very first chapter in the book of Acts repeats the words of Jesus, that the apostles will be witnesses to these things to all nations. That continuation from the gospel of Luke to the Acts of those same apostles as they went about learning to be witnesses, learning to talk about something that they couldn’t explain, to talk about all that they had come to understand, is the world that you and I are a part of. We are not witnesses to the *events* that we read about in scripture, but we are a witnesses to the truth of scripture by being the Church – with a capital C.

As the apostles began to try to talk about the experiences that no one else had shared, and struggled to live into their own questions about how the resurrection was going to be meaningful and manifest in their lives, the Church with a capital C was born. From the beginning the Church has wrestled with what it believed. The PC(USA) that you and I are a part of is a result of so many years of humans wrestling with and choosing sides about, what is true about what we believe. What does it mean to believe something, and yet wrestle with whether it is true or not? If we believe it, doesn’t that mean that we also believe it to be true?

Enter black hole number 2. What does our denomination say about Jesus’ resurrection? Is it a metaphor? Is it only spiritual? What do we modern day people say we believe? Why did the disciples have such a difficult time believing that Jesus rose from the dead? While Jesus did raise people from the dead in biblical texts, they did eventually die, as humans do. Denominations were born over questions about what happened between the time when Jesus died, and finally rose to be with God. So what does one do in these modern times (remember the disciples were modern too, in their time) when one has a question?

I googled it of course. “Did Jesus rise from the dead?”

“Recalculating.”

Here are some of the many sites that came up in that query.

Wikipedia, The Gospel Coalition, Peaceful Science where a physicist declared “the electron is round and Jesus rose from the dead,” Uncover.org, The San Diego Union Tribune, Quora, GotQuestions.org, CNN, BibleTools.com, Ny Times2 etc. One writer from The Gospel Coalition argued against one explanation of Jesus’ resurrection that stated, “He revived in the tomb somehow, escaped, and managed to convince his disciples he was risen from the dead.”

Those of us with a Love/Hate relationship with technology can understand the joy of finding a ready answer, even at a beginners level, from a trusted source about an interest or curiosity we have. But the idea that “if it’s on the internet it must be true” has long been debunked.

The absurdity of making a decision about the reality of Jesus’ resurrection from the internet is real. Without human connections, the beliefs that matter the most are just noise. The disciples didn’t have 2,000 years’ worth of tools and resources at their disposal to work these things out. They just told what they heard from the source. It was *Jesus* who opened their minds to understand the scriptures. As a community the Church has the opportunity to be that source even as we work out our own answers. We can be witnesses to the shared journey that we are all on helping each other, sharing, learning, worshipping, working, studying together.

Part of being witnesses to the reality of God in Christ is deciding what to do with our resources of time, money, talent, skills and abilities, energy, etc. Our session on Tuesday made a decision to send our portion of the Peace and Global Witness Offering this year to an organization that will provide support for the people in Gaza who are suffering on an unimaginable scale. Some at Bethany give their time by committing to writing postcards that remind people to vote. Some here are working to find a way to be better partners with the earth by looking in to solar panels. The planners of the Spring Tea are deciding what organization to highlight on that special afternoon. On an individual level there are about as many important causes as there are people here at Bethany. Everything we do as community, as friends, that leaves the imprint of God’s love with someone, is our way to be witnesses to what we understand about our faith.

The call to the disciples is the same as it is to us. We are to look to the source and be witnesses to the truth of Christ that we know in our hearts.

Let us pray…

**1Isaiah 50: “I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those** who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”

2<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/09/opinion/jesus-rise-from-the-dead-easter.html>

NY Times opinion. Interview with N.T. Wright