

“Life With Doubts and Mystery”

A sermon based on Luke 24:1-12
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
on Sunday, April 21st, 2019
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Christ is risen!
(He is risen, indeed)

And this always comes as such good news to God's some years frozen Northern disciples. We need good news. We need hope. We need these gorgeous banners, the wonderful music, and all of these flowers.

Yet when we read the Easter story in the Gospels, we may come away amazed by the simplicity of their narratives. When the Gospel writers tell the story of that first Easter morning, they do not do so as I might like to tell it.

As a movie lover, I would have awesome amounts of light to convey the splendor and power of the resurrection. I might have an earthquake to accompany the rolling away of the stone. I might want massive, impressive cloud formations in the sky, with lightning, kind of like the scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when they open the ark.

That would be dazzling. That would be impressive. That would make for a great movie or great television. That is not how the Gospels tell the story, however.

Every time I read the Gospel accounts, I come away marveling at their earthy simplicity. There is no splendor, no great, overpowering light, no earthquake, no impressive display of clouds. There aren't even any angel choirs who sing, like those that sang at the birth of Jesus.

Instead, John tells us that Jesus, as the risen Lord, gets confused with the gardener. The Risen Lord, the one in whom all things were created, the one in whom all things continue to hold together, the victor over death and the grave, over betrayal and abandonment looks no more impressive than the dude who prunes the shrubbery.

I have come to love this about the Gospels. For the evangelists were not out to make great television. They did not hope that the gospels would become

wonderful screen plays. They were written to inspire faith, to tell us who Jesus is and to invite readers to follow him.

And one of the ways they do this so well is by telling the story in such an earthy, human way, in such a way that we can see ourselves in the disciples. They were not spiritual giants, at least not in the Gospels. They were like us. We are like them. And, therefore, this business of faith is possible for us, just as it was for them. There is hope for us, as there was for them. I find great, good news in that, which is one thing I think the Gospel writers hoped all readers would find in their work.

II

One aspect that should jump out at you this morning is the confusion, the doubt, even the unbelief, that Luke includes as part of his telling of that first Easter morning. Those first disciples experienced these feelings just as much as we may experience them today. With respect to those first disciples, we can understand how they might be confused, doubtful or disbelieving.

In that last week, events had been happening so fast. Just the Sunday before, they had entered Jerusalem with Jesus in a parade of loud acclaim and the waving of palms. That was followed by days of teaching in the Temple, confrontations and arguments with the religious authorities, and the overturning of the tables of the money changers. The hopes of the disciples must have been rising that Jesus was the king for which they had hoped, and that the time had come at last to restore the nation, to liberate them all from the oppression of the Romans.

Then there was the Last Supper. It wasn't the usual sort of Passover. Jesus did and said some pretty unusual things. What did it all mean? That was followed by the arrest, the trial, the fear, and the awful crucifixion. And at no point on Thursday night or Friday did God intervene.

How quickly their hopes were dashed. They were devastated. Friday night and Saturday, they grieved, and they fearfully wondered, "Will we be next?" None of them had expected any of this.

Then came Sunday morning. Luke tells us that, first thing, at the crack of dawn, the women went to the tomb with spices. They weren't going with the expectation that they would help freshen up the newly raised Jesus. They were going to finish preparing his dead body for burial. They went to offer one final act of love and devotion.

As they arrive at the tomb, however, they discover that the stone has been moved. What were they to make of that? Maybe they began to feel apprehensive. When they looked in and found no body, did they think, "Hallelujah! He's risen!"? No. Their first thought was to wonder who had taken the body. Who had added one final insult to grieving disciples?

But then, as they struggled with these thoughts, Luke tells us two men in brilliant clothes appeared to them. And the men mildly rebuke the women, provocatively asking, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

After being reminded of what Jesus had told them, the women run back to tell the others what they have seen. Do the disciples rejoice, and welcome gladly the news? No. No one could believe what they said. Hear again the way Luke tells it: "...this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them." (vs. 11)

The first thing to acknowledge today is the burden of the resurrection. It is no easy thing for us to believe, just as it wasn't for those first amazed, confused and doubtful disciples. It accords with nothing in our experience, just as the disciples had no parallel to which to appeal. They had seen Jesus resuscitate the dead, yes. But they had seen no resurrections.

This was something altogether new, and like us, they did not know what to make of it at first. Actually, they did. Like us, they doubted and disbelieved.

III

Is that a bad thing, to doubt? No, it certainly is not. At many points in our journeys of faith, we will doubt. There are many aspects of faith that are hard for us to embrace. Sometimes a hard experience will cause something we previously embraced without much question to become doubtful. Doubt is normal, run of the mill, experience for disciples. The writer and Presbyterian

minister Frederick Beuchner has written that “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith.” Doubt is what keeps our faith moving and engaged. It keeps us from becoming complacent, or from ever reducing our faith and our experience of God to a set of easily understandable propositions.

Ultimately, in matters of Christian faith, we are dealing with mysteries. The Apostle Paul called us “stewards of the mysteries.” And as with most things mysterious, in faith, there will be times when we feel a little uneasy, at least a little unsure, and even more than a little doubtful. In this, we are no different than the first disciples. Thanks be to God for that!

Philip Henslowe is one of the main characters in the wonderful film *Shakespeare In Love*. He is the inept, mostly unattractive director of the Rose Theater, and the employer of Shakespeare. At three or four points in the film, Henslowe speaks what my wife thinks are the best lines in the film. Just when all seems lost, when the theater has been closed and it looks as if the play will not go on, when Henslowe says that “the natural condition” of the theater “is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster,” when Henslowe and Shakespeare realize that they are short of quality actors, when the day finally comes for the play’s opening only to find that there is no one to play Juliet, Henslowe speaks the words of truth. At each of those times, Henslowe says it will be all right. To which others ask, “How will it?!” And Henslowe answers, “I don’t know. It’s a mystery.”

How can it be that Jesus was raised from the dead? How can it be that we can believe such a thing? I don’t know. It’s a mystery. So if you find yourself here not at all sure about all of this, and if you are struggling to make yourself feel the way you may think you are supposed to feel today, hear the good news as Luke presents it. Those first disciples found it tough, too.

It is so hard, in fact, that this faith is referred to as a gift. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...” It is a mystery, and it is a gift.

Those first disciples had trouble even recognizing the risen Christ. Mary Magdalene thought he was the gardener. The disciples on the road to Emmaus

thought he was just another traveler. How did they end up recognizing him? They recognized him when he called their names. They recognized him as they remembered his words. They recognized him in the breaking of bread.

Those are the same ways we recognize him today, as our names are called in our baptisms, as we hear the scriptures read and interpreted, and as we gather around his Table. The two men who appeared to the women said, "Remember what he told you..." And Luke tells us in verse 8, "...they remembered his words."

That is how they began to understand and come to believe. Our faith works the same way for us today. This is why it is so important that we take part in the worship life of our church, that we study God's word and practice our faith. For how can we remember what Jesus said when we haven't heard it here to begin with, or when we haven't read the gospels ourselves?

Faith, belief is a gift. And even with this gift, it can feel like we're not making much progress. The story is told of two old codgers from New Hampshire who went Moose hunting every year near Moose Lake in northern Maine. They would fly in each year on a small plane, stay for a week, and the plane would return to pick them up.

As the pilot was dropping them off, he reminded them, "I'll be back in one week, and we can carry the two of you and one moose." The two hunters nodded and set out into the woods.

A week later, the pilot brought the plane up to shore, and was annoyed to see the two hunters sitting on shore with two moose carcasses, and big ones, too. "I told you guys we could carry only one moose."

One hunter replied, "The guy last year didn't have a problem with two."

So the three men loaded both moose and themselves. The plane required almost the entire lake before the pilot could pull it into the air, and it barely cleared the trees on the far side. Not far beyond the edge of the lake, though, the plane clipped a tall pine, causing the plane to crash, scattering pieces of wings and antlers.

When the two old codgers came to, one of them asked, "Where are we?" To which the other wearily answered, "About 100 yards further than we made it last year."

That's how it can be for us. We don't feel like we're making much progress in the faith. Today, we celebrate with joy the love of God, a love that does not depend on our progress.

As John Chrysostom preached in his Easter homily centuries ago: "Come all of you: enter into the joy of your Lord. You the first and you the last, receive alike your reward; you rich and you poor, dance together; you sober and you weaklings, celebrate the day; you who have kept the fast and you who have not, rejoice today...All of you enjoy the banquet of faith; all of you receive the riches of God's goodness. Let no one grieve her poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one weep over his sins, for pardon has shone from the grave; let no one fear death, for the death of our Savior has set us free:...

Christ is risen and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen and life is freed. Christ is risen and tomb is emptied of the dead:...To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."