

Sermon: If At First You Don't Believe
Text: Luke 24:36-48
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Context: WWPC
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While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering. . .

Luke 24:41

This story of Jesus's first post-resurrection appearance among the disciples reminds me of another story I have previously shared with some of you.

This one is admittedly quite a bit less famous. The protagonist happens to be the only character, and he's also a pretty ordinary guy.

It's a story about the time I tried to replace the battery in our defibrillator. Stay with me for a second. There's a connection.

You've seen defibrillators in the movies and on TV. They're those devices with the chest paddles that deliver a shock strong enough to restart a person's heart. Turns out defibrillators now come in portable versions, for placement wherever the public gathers in large numbers, including in churches.

We keep ours in the storage area right back here. A few years ago I was passing through the space on my way into the Chapel when I heard a chirping sound coming from the box that houses the unit. This was the device's way of letting passersby know that it needed a new battery.

You can imagine that if it's going to deliver a strong enough jolt to raise someone from the dead, the battery in these things has to be fresh and strong,

So, I went to the company's website and ordered a new battery. When it came in, I removed the device from the box where it's housed and took it into my office to open it up and change the battery.

I set it down on my desk and appraised it wearily. Yes, the battery might have grown a little weak over time, but it probably still had a strong enough charge to deliver quite a jolt.

I undid the security latches and gingerly began to raise the lid, in the way one might lift the lid on a basket that contains a coiled rattlesnake.

I got it open about three inches when something happened I did not expect.

DON'T PANIC! A recorded voice shouted at me.

Whoever designed this unit evidently failed to appreciate the unintended effect that this startling command might have on potential users of this device. Honestly, if I had been holding it my hands I suspect I would have flung the thing through the ceiling in my office.

As it was, I just about had a heart attack myself, which is sort of an ironic and counterproductive effect for a defibrillator.

I say this because my startled response is probably pretty close to how the disciples felt when Jesus appeared to them for the first time following the death and burial of their leader and teacher just three days earlier.

The disciples are all sitting around together, sharing some food. I imagine they're also sharing their fondest memories from the journey they've all been on together - - the ridiculous journey of following a nobody from nowhere--and probably also sharing their concerns about what comes next, what their immediate future is going to look like.

Weirdly, they have just heard a report that Jesus might not actually be dead. Two unknown travelers track them down and insist that Jesus has just appeared to them. They describe how he seemingly appeared out of nowhere while they were walking.

They confess that they didn't recognize him until later when they were eating a meal with him. And how the moment they figured out who he was, he just sort of disappeared somehow.

I suspect that to the disciples' ears, and perhaps to ours, too, the story is a little far-fetched, not to mention a little creepy, since they all watched Jesus die. So I imagine they're a little skeptical.

But then, without warning, Jesus appears among them. One minute he's not there, the next, shazaam!, he materializes literally out of nowhere and is now standing right in the middle of them..

“Peace!” he declares.

On one hand, this is not such a surprise. “Peace” is exactly what you would expect Jesus to say. It was then and still is the standard greeting throughout the Middle East. Shalom, salaam, there are slightly different ways to say it in different languages and different cultures, but “peace” is the standard greeting throughout the Middle East.

And yet, given the circumstances, it’s anything but an ordinary greeting. The effect of this sudden and historically unprecedented appearance of a man who was known to be dead is so pronounced it’s almost comical.

Here’s how the text describes their reaction: “They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.”

What that means is that if any of these unsuspecting men (or women for that matter) happened to be sipping on a cup of wine at the time, I suspect the wine was violently ejected from the goblets and sprayed all over the ceiling of the little room where they were all huddled.

If this was a movie, it’s easy to imagine that this scene would likely be played for comic effect.

But there’s another way to read it. This reading is a little more . . . potent. Same setting, same facts, same people. Suddenly in the middle of a locked room appears a man with nail scars in his hands and a lethal gash in his side, a beatific glow emanating from his resurrected body like hot smoke from a volcano.

On this reading Jesus takes something plain and ordinary — “Peace!”, “Good Morning!” — and turns it into a declaration of cosmic significance. When this man, this man who claimed all along to be God’s son and predicted this astounding post-death rendezvous, when this man walks into a locked room and declares “Peace!” you’d better believe it.

You’d better believe that our assumptions about life and death have just changed — that the reality we take for granted in which hope dies with our loved one, in which nail scars disappear as a dead body decomposes — you’d better believe that this reality has given way to something bigger.

When this man says “Peace,” you’d better believe it. Who wouldn’t? He’s standing *right there*.

Well, it turns out none of them believe it. Jesus can obviously see the terror in their eyes, the incredulity on their faces. Because what happens next is one of the most touching moments in all of scripture.

“Hey, guys, don’t be afraid,” he assures them. “It’s me, really. Don’t be afraid. I’m not a ghost. See, here. Look at my hands, see my feet? It’s okay. Touch me and you’ll see. It’s me.”

I don’t know about you, but if I had just been resurrected, if I had a body that could now walk through locked doors and materialize out of nowhere, the one thing I would change about myself is my scars. But not Jesus. His wounds had healed, yes, but the scars stayed. They’re part of his eternal identity. More than his face or his voice, the wounds in his hands and feet are the way the disciples know it’s him.

So it is with us, in a way. Our wounds may heal but the scars stay. They’re part of our story, our identity. We can’t change them. But that doesn’t mean we have to hide them, or be limited by them.

A few years ago I attended a pastoral care conference that was centered on the topic of pain -- physical and psychological and emotional pain.

One of the presenters – I’ll call him Mike – told how, growing up, it didn’t matter how badly he hurt himself; his father’s reaction was always the same: some variation of shake it off, tough it out, big boys don’t cry.

That was well and good until a few years ago when Mike’s brother committed suicide. No way to shake that one off. Mike himself figuratively doubled over in pain and stayed that way for a good while.

His father tried to follow his own advice. He tried to shake it off, tried to tough it out, tried not to cry, but he couldn’t. There was no way to tough this one out—he had to go through it like everyone else. And he found out that big boys do, in fact, cry.

Several years after the suicide, Mike went home for the holidays. He and his father — I'll call him Frank — paid a visit to the grave, to pray and to remember a brother and a son, and just to be with one another in their still-powerful grief.

While they were there, Frank told his son a story he'd not told anyone before, not even his wife, Mike's mom.

Apparently when he was a little boy, Frank's own father was dying. On the very day his dad would die, young Frank cut his finger.

Somehow his father knew, and when Frank went to visit him in the hospital for what would be the last time, his sweet father asked to see his son's bandaged finger. I bet anything he wanted to kiss it and make it better, one last time.

But young Frank could not bring himself to share his small, boyish pain with his dying father. Instead of showing him his finger, he hid it behind his back.

The next time Frank saw his dad was at the funeral home. He showed him his finger then, but it was too late. He wanted desperately for his dad to see him and acknowledge him and kiss that hurt finger, but his dad could no longer share in his pain.

And so Frank spent the rest of his life hiding his finger behind his back, not showing his pain to anyone, a legacy of denial that he passed on to his son, Mike: shake it off, tough it out, big boys don't cry.

In finally sharing the story of his pain, Frank gave his son an entry point into his life that Mike had never had before. Frank's wound, suffered as a child, shut a door into his life and heart that remained closed for 40 years. But finally, in that cemetery, while grieving a shared loss, Mike got the inside edition to his father's story, an explanation for his dad's tough guy exterior.

So it is with us, in a way. Our wounds may heal but the scars stay. They're part of our story, our identity. We can't change them. But they don't have to be the end of the story.

They can be the beginning.

To explain what I mean by that, there is one last piece to this post-Easter story that speaks specifically to the question of faith, and to the meaning of Easter itself. And in closing I want to touch on it briefly.

After Jesus extends this incredibly intimate invitation to touch his wounded hands and feet, after he has calmed their fears, after he has assured them that they are not seeing a ghost, that it is indeed he himself who is now standing in their midst, even after all of that, here is how Luke describes their response:

“While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering,”

I am not a Greek scholar but I can tell you that the people who translated this text are. They’re experts, the very best in the world.

So if you think, gosh, grammatically and syntactically that sentence is an absolute mess. You would be right. But that’s not an error in translation.

It’s a completely muddled sentence because it’s describing a completely muddled experience.

If you think you have Easter figured out, you don’t. If you think resurrection can easily be described using human categories and constructs and language, you’re wrong.

But that’s as it should be. Easter should leave us feeling the same way it left the disciples, vibrating with a combination of joy and, yes, doubt and curiosity and wonder.

So that instead of being certain about what happened then, we might continue to ask ourselves what Easter means today.

When we look at our own wounded hands and feet and sides, our own broken hearts, our own shattered dreams, what does Easter mean, to us?

What does Easter mean for families who’ve been broken apart by deportation raids, with parents carted off to detention centers and young children left alone, bereft and terrified?

What does Easter mean to families in Syria, with bombs raining down on them, bombs dropped by their government and ours?

Here's one possible answer to that question.

This is from an Instagram post I read just this morning. It was put up by someone just as ordinary as you or me. But she might as well have been one of the disciples, who first bore witness to the heartbreak of Good Friday, then found themselves standing in the presence of the risen Christ:

“I woke this morning to reports of the Syrian devastation. The little ones’ terrified faces. Mothers and fathers who have spent their lives fleeing- fleeing once again. My first response was: Nope. I’m done. This is just too . . . much. I changed the channel to House Hunters.

“Then I sat on the couch and thought: What if that was Abby and me fleeing? What if those were Chase and Tish and Amma’s terrified faces? And what if another mother across the globe saw us and decided our pain was “too much,” so instead of doing what she could, she changed the channel?

“WE WILL NOT GO NUMB. We will NOT be people of pity who console ourselves by saying: I feel your pain in my heart. Pity is nothing.

Instead: We will be people of Love. Love is everything. Love is: Your pain in my heart and **BACK OUT THROUGH MY HANDS.**

“Together, we will **DO SOMETHING.** We not allow the fact that we cannot do everything keep us from doing **SOMETHING.**

“So here I am. I haven’t put a bra on yet but I’m off the couch and in my office. I called the board for my favorite non-profit, Together Rising, and said: **LET’S GO, SISTERS.**”

Friends, we are the hands and feet -- the wounded hands and feet -- of Jesus.

Yes, we also bear our own wounds, and we are called now to do the same thing Jesus asked of his disciples, to go into the world, into this sometimes terrifying, often confusing, regularly heart-breaking, and utterly beautiful and wondrous world, and to love it, and everyone in it, as much as he did.

So, brothers and sisters, let’s go!