

sermon-4/26/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Resurrection: Comforting, Yet Unsettling”  
Luke 24:36b-48  
By Jim Patten

The story of the resurrection in Luke today is both a bit spooky and incredibly normal all at the same time. The spooky part is easy to see. The resurrected Christ seems to appear out of nowhere. At first the disciples think he is a ghost. They are terrified. They were already jumpy after what had happened the last few days. The last thing they wanted to encounter was a ghost.

But then this ghost turns out to be anything but a ghost. It is their beloved leader, the crucified one. He even has the marks of crucifixion on his hands and feet. Then comes the normal part. Listen again to the questions he asks of the disciples. One commentator phrased them this way: “Why are you freaking out?” And, “What’s for dinner?” The NRSV does not translate those questions in exactly that form, but that is basically what Jesus asked.

The risen Christ sounds pretty down to earth, does he not? That is at least part of the point Luke was trying to make. Those early disciples experienced resurrection fleshed out, as it were, in the life they knew. It was life as normal only that life was being transformed at the same time.

This gets us into the importance of the bodily resurrection for the early church. Actually, as scholars point out, there is a trajectory in the stories of the resurrection as we move through the first century of Christian writings. Paul, historically the first witness to the resurrection in the New Testament, does not make a big point of the body of the resurrected Christ. In fact, for Paul, the resurrected one has a spiritual body. Paul’s experience of the risen Christ does not involve a body. He only hears a voice from the clouds.

Next, in chronological order, comes the gospel of Mark. In the original ending of Mark there is no resurrection appearances, only an empty tomb. By the time we get to Luke and John, there is a big emphasis on the physical body of the resurrected one. Note, in our text for today, Christ’s body still has the marks of crucifixion on it. And, Christ even makes a point of eating something in front of them proving he is no ghost.

Scholars tell us the early church was probably arguing with those who said the body was unimportant. What mattered was our spirits. They believed the body was even an impediment to our spiritual lives. The Church would have none of that. Bodies are important. God cares as much for our bodies as for our spirits. Our bodies can be sacred temples of the holy.

Obviously there is not one way to come to terms with the body of the resurrected Christ. The accounts simply don’t agree with one another. But, the fact that the New Testament wants to affirm the bodily resurrection tells us something very important.

As one commentator writes, “To insist on the reality of the resurrected body is to demand that we accept our present reality as the place where transformations of ultimate significance takes place.” Life on this earth, with all its limitations, its imperfections, is still a place where we can encounter the sacred. Certainly the incarnation of God in Christ affirms that. So, too, is the insistence on the bodily resurrection.

Does that mean we have to believe the resurrection is all about a literal body that shows up on earth? Some have no difficulty doing that. They even find that comforting. Others find that an impediment in their faith journey. I find I am deeply touched by what the bodily resurrection wants to affirm. Our bodies are not some dirty thing that block our spiritual growth. Our bodies, our real lives, are where God meets us. When we give ourselves to God, transformations, however incomplete, can happen in this life.

Is that what the resurrection means? The New Testament wants to emphasize some other points as well. Note the centrality of Bible study in Luke. Apparently the resurrected Christ is very interested in Bible study. We read the two on the road to Emmaus received a Bible study with the unknown stranger who happened to be the risen Christ. And in our passage Christ jumps right into another Bible study.

Sadly, we never hear the details of what Christ taught and said. Wouldn't it have been great to hear that study? What we are left with is that we can begin to make sense of the resurrection in the context of the Bible. It is giving our attention to the words of scripture that resurrection begins to make sense in our lives.

Many of us give far too little attention to good Bible study and then wonder why our faith feels so shallow or unexciting. It can certainly feel more like duty, or routine than it can feel like it is all about transformations. You might want to reconsider giving Bible study another shot.

The next thing to notice is that resurrection is not just unambiguous good news for the disciples. I am indebted to Wil Willimon for this insight. Sure resurrection is good news. But it is also challenging news. Let's look a little closer at both sides of this powerful event.

The good news side is pretty easy to notice. God, in Christ, defeated death. Death will no longer have the last word in our lives. That is good news indeed. See also how the disciples experienced forgiveness in their encounters with the risen Christ. Some scholars say the sense of relief at being forgiven was the number one emotion the disciples felt after the resurrection. They had abandoned their leader when things got hot. Guilt and shame must have been strong. But the risen Christ comes offering peace and forgiveness. How might being forgiven or forgiving others become a component of our own resurrection faith?

One commentator says when Jesus comes to the disciples he commissions them, and us, for that matter, “to declare the presence and power of God in the midst of tragedy, despair

and death. They are not ultimate-God is.” In a world that can easily suck the hope right out of us because of all the greed, hatred, and violence that is so pervasive, to realize those realities are not ultimate is good news.

But there are also some very challenging aspects of resurrection. Jesus calls the disciples to follow in his footsteps. We know where those footsteps led for Jesus. We know where many of the early disciples ended up—captured, tortured and killed. What would it mean for us to follow the resurrected one in our day?

I don't see martyrdom as the main possibility for most of us, thank God. But to accept resurrection as real, to choose to follow the pioneer of our faith, is to be willing to accept being put out, maybe even inconvenienced, at the least, in our attempts to be faithful. It may be the sacrifice it takes to live more simply so we can give more away to those in need. It may be setting priorities that speak more clearly of the values we confess. It may even involve witnessing!

Witnessing, I realize, is a loaded word. It conjures up all kinds of things most of us want nothing to do with. But, there are ways to witness that are not offensive. Those ways can be tough, to be sure, but they don't have to make us unwelcome guests in people's lives.

One commentator says to be a witness “each of us is called to communicate to others that the faith we hold gives meaning to life and grace for living.” That doesn't have to be done on street corners. It can happen over a cup of coffee talking to a friend who is going through a difficult time. It can happen when we talk with our children about what sustains us when times get tough. We all have those moments when giving voice to our deepest beliefs and hopes is appropriate. Often we let them slide by for fear we would embarrass ourselves, or come across as some fanatic religious freak.

I came across another statement about being a witness that struck me as profound and nosy at the same time. I will close with it. “We are witnesses when we can invite someone to look into our homes, our families, our friendships, our work, our checkbook, our daytimer, and find Jesus there.” Have mercy! Amen