

Seeing is Believing
Luke 24:36b-48
Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman
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36While they were talking about this, 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, 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.

There are four post-resurrection stories in this, the last chapter of Luke. This morning's text is the next-to-last one. It immediately follows the account of the two disciples walking on the Emmaus road who didn't recognize Jesus until he broke bread, blessed it, and gave it to them.

Three things interest me about this morning's episode: What Jesus asked his disciples to do; the questions he asked them; and how his disciples responded to this post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. On this last point, look at the specific words: they were **startled, terrified, frightened, joy(ful), disbelieving, and wondering**. Tell me now, which was it? Were they **startled, terrified, frightened, and disbelieving**, or **joy(ful) and wondering**.

Their responses prompted two of Jesus' 3 questions to them:

- **Why are you frightened?** Jesus appearance must have scared the wits out of them.
- **Why do doubts arise in your hearts?** They apparently couldn't believe what they were seeing.
- Have you anything here to eat? (What's to eat? Parents hear that from children all the time, right?)

This passage leaves us with a perplexing theological question: just what is the nature of the resurrected body of Christ?

- Luke suggests there is a great deal of continuity between the earthly body and the resurrected body. His resurrected body had hands and feet. He consumed fish, suggesting bodily needs like ours.

- Paul, on the other hand, argues that there is radical discontinuity between Jesus' earthly body and his resurrected body (1 Cor. 15). The earthly body is perishable; the resurrected body is imperishable. The first is a physical body, the second a spiritual body.
- What Luke and Paul had in common: Jesus' resurrection was a bodily resurrection. He was not a mere ghost or an apparition or even only a spiritual reality. His body was not merely the resuscitation of his earthly body (like Lazarus who, of course, had to die again). There was some physicality to his resurrected body.

To go more deeply into this question about the nature of the resurrected body would be more suited to the lectern than the pulpit; it would be better treated in a theological lecture than a sermon. We'll just have to wait and see what the nature of Jesus' resurrected body was.

About a month before COVID hit us last year, I had an evening meeting at Camp Mack, the Church of the Brethren camp south of Goshen. It was a dark, rainy night, and I was concerned about finding the turnoff to the camp, because it had been a long time since I had been there. Wouldn't you know, I turned too soon and nearly drove into an irrigation ditch! Fortunately, there weren't many cars on the road that night, which was to my advantage.

This was the second time I had difficulty finding a turnoff on a dark, rainy night. The other time I drove over a curb. OK, I said to myself: it's time; it's time to have cataract surgery. Which I did. And after the surgery on both eyes, I could see again: everything seemed lighter and brighter.

Jesus' disciples needed some kind of cataract surgery so that they could see—really see—what was right in front of their eyes—the risen Christ. Of course, this wasn't the only account of Jesus' disciples being mystified about Jesus' resurrection. Multiple times Jesus had to demonstrate to them that he was not a mere ghost nor was he an apparition.

- In John's gospel we have the well-known story about the so-called "doubting" Thomas. Unless Thomas could see and touch the mark of the nails on Jesus hand and side, he wouldn't believe in the resurrection. He was a proto-empiricist—or an honorary citizen of Missouri, the "show me" state.
- In Matthew's gospel Jesus encountered his disciples after the resurrection on a mountain in Galilee: *When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.* Does this sound familiar? Does this describe our own experience, a mixture of awe and doubt?
- Many of you are aware of the fact that Mark's gospel has two endings, a shorter one and a longer one?
 - The shorter ending concludes with the mystery of the empty tomb; *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*
 - Jesus does appear to the disciples in the longer ending, but Jesus *upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.*
- In Luke's gospel the report of the women testifying to the empty tomb elicited this response from the male disciples: *it seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.* (Idle tale in Greek is the word from which we get delirious: the disciples were

accusing the women who witnessed the empty tomb of being delirious—out of their minds.)

- This response on the part of the male disciples could well be a reflection of the cultural assumption that women and children were not credible witnesses. Josephus, the Jewish scholar of the first century, said: *From women let not evidence be accepted [in a court of law], because of the levity of their sex.*
- This reminds me of the “Naked Pastor” cartoon: after the women reported to the male disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead, the male disciples responded: *So ladies, thanks for being the first to witness and report the resurrection. And we’ll take it from here.* Such a typical male response, right? We can handle this.

Obviously, the disciples were in serious need of cataract surgery so that they could see the new thing God had done: **God raised Jesus from the dead as a sign that God is working to make all things new, to bring life out of death, light out of darkness, good out of evil.**

Someone—I don’t know who—came up with three Bs to identify the components of faith: **believing** (convictions about the faith), **behaving** (actions in response to faith), **belonging** (being part of a community of faith).

As ingenious as the 3 Bs are, something comes before them and makes them possible: I think **faith is first and foremost a matter of seeing—perception—seeing with the eyes of faith:** how we look at the world, how we look at ourselves in relation to God, how we look at both past and future. **This perception, seeing with the eyes of faith, entails seeing all reality through the prism of the resurrected Christ, the One who saves sinners and liberates the captives and gives us all hope for the future.**

Some of you know the name Julia Kasdorf. She is a published, award-winning poet with Mennonite roots, who teaches at Penn State University. I know her as Julie Spicher. She was a high schooler in Scottdale when Suzanne and I were youth sponsors at our church. I knew already then that Julie would go far: she was smart; she had incredible speech skills and an expansive vocabulary. But most of all Julie was adept at perception; she could see things that others couldn’t see: in nature, in human behavior, in community.

Some people were inclined to conclude that “Julie was seeing things,” as though what she was seeing was a consequence of her fertile imagination. Precisely! Isn’t this the role of the artist, seeing things the rest of us don’t and then conveying to us what she sees through her art, whether its poetry, music, art, dance, or drama?

This is one reason why faith needs the arts: there is a similarity of vocation or function between the arts and faith, related to the capacity of perceiving and sharing what we perceive. We see and then we tell what we have seen. *You are witnesses of these things*, Jesus said at the end of our text this morning.

If we want to know how this played out, we have to read Luke’s second volume, Acts, the beginning of the missionary movement starting in Jerusalem and eventually spreading around the

whole world. In Luke's first book, his gospel, Jesus is the bearer of God's Spirit; in his second book, Acts, the church is the bearer of God's Spirit. But Pentecost had to happen first.

Here is what I'm perceiving/seeing with the eyes of faith: **we are an Easter people living in a Good Friday world.** All around us is darkness and death. We are living in a culture of death.

We just had another mass killing—in our own state. It is no longer a matter of whether we will have another mass killing, but when and where and how many are killed and what is the ostensible motive.

But it's not just humans that are dying. In 2020 65 North American plant species were declared extinct. *Scientific American* says we have an extinction crisis and that part of the problem is that we also have an extinction denial. The good news is that when efforts are made to save threatened species, there is often a good turnaround record.

Because of Jesus' resurrection, death doesn't have the final word.

Where do we see life flourishing in the midst of this death culture? How can we contribute to the flourishing of life? **How can we be Easter people living in a Good Friday world?**