

3rd Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 4.18.21

Luke 24:36-48

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look 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.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then 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.” Then he **opened their minds** to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that **repentance** and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (237)

When I first started out in ministry, I had a nagging worry. I’d need to protect this faith of mine. I’d need to keep this whole thing in a special container, something like the secret closet of my soul that the writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, that medieval mystery text, imagined. These truth claims, so astounding and unlikely; and the Bible, full of weirdness and wonder; church tradition and theology, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit: I’d need to store all these things in a special room in my mind, the way a museum or a library is made as the perfect environment for less-than-durable goods.

Because I’d just staked my life on it. I’d just spent four years readying myself for this thing I hadn’t been sure I was going to do until a couple years in. I didn’t go to divinity school with ministry in mind. It’s just that it slowly dawned on me as I poked my way through. (You know, sometimes your life path shows up one brick at a time.) So, parish ministry. Of course. A continuity in my life that was also a total surprise to almost everyone, including me.

But it was a life built on...what? Proclamations of faith, which might well disintegrate under too much scrutiny, like manna in the wilderness? The sun would come up, dry the morning into day, and that manna would disappear, basically dew.

Did you know this? Manna, which is Hebrew for “what is it?” is thought in some quarters to have been a very substantive dew, the secretion of a desert insect combined with the moisture that settles in with night. Eat it at daybreak, and you’ve got some protein, you’ve got some sugar. But by the time the sun is in the sky, it’s gone, or it’s someone else’s food. Worms. Mold.

Incidentally, I preached this once, early on. I thought it was a wonder, God providing in the wilderness, but just barely. The one fundamentalist in the congregation got up then and there, walked out. She really needed that manna (“what is it?”) to be loaves of bread, falling from the sky, still warm from God’s oven.

But what if the life of faith is like that, I worried, especially amidst this hot, parched time, especially in this most post-Christian place, western Massachusetts. Dew drying up under the spotlight of scrutiny.

Such was the experience of more than a few students at divinity school.

They’d come from churches that had solid Sunday school programs, didactic and doctrinal preaching practices. They *knew* what the Bible meant, the Bible being a chief concern. They knew how it came to be and how we’re now to read it.

Then they got to divinity school, and their professors taught them to take it apart, to read it critically, against its own grain. They encouraged the taking it out of its own tautology: the Bible is true because it says it’s true, and since its true we can believe this self-assertion.

But, notice how the flood story is probably two flood stories woven together, two stories from two ancient cultures now come together. Notice that the book of Job is probably two stories of such a man, a bare-bones fable cut in half and stuffed with a series of poetic monologues from a few centuries later. Notice: Matthew the tax collector most likely didn’t write the Gospel of Matthew, Paul the apostle and prolific letter writer most likely didn’t write all those letters, and the five books of Moses were likely *not* written by Moses. I mean, in the fifth book of Moses there’s written of Moses’ death, a tough trick to pull off even for someone as remarkable as Moses.

But, so what?

Well, this was a disturbance to more than a few students—because if all that’s been misperceived, or mis-preached, then maybe the whole thing is a mere fabrication. Maybe the whole thing needs deceptive practice because it couldn’t withstand the truth.

As for me, it was only a disturbance after I’d staked my life on it. Ordained, in debt, and suddenly serving a church with Sunday morning always just a few days away, now I needed to be able to *rely* on this—the Bible, the Holy Spirit, a Resurrected Lord.

Better not look down.

Turns out one of the criteria of biblical analysis is the so-called criterion of embarrassment. This asserts that an account is likely to be true if it’s embarrassing, if it would just have been easier to say something else or not to say anything about it at all. Any story, or version of a story, or

attestation that makes the writer or the attestor seem less than sound: this is given some weight of credibility.

Rest assured, it's rarely used alone. It's typically one of a number of criteria used together, along with (say) the criterion of dissimilarity or the criterion of multiple attestation.

But the criterion of embarrassment: it gives us the baptism of Jesus by John as a reliable account—because, if it were all just made up, wouldn't a more comfortable assertion be that Jesus baptized John?

It gives us the folly of the disciples as likely true, because wouldn't it have been less embarrassing to imagine the disciples, in their proximity to Jesus, as really *getting* it, well disciplined, well-grounded, wise? This, rather than how they tend to be portrayed, as bickering, confused, and falling asleep or running away. So, they probably were that way, bickering, confused, falling asleep, running away.

A critical argument for credibility that is basically just this: "Why would I make this up?" it's not sophisticated but it's a useful frame.

And queen of the claims of the criterion of embarrassment is this, the resurrection of Jesus in body—because, the resurrection of him in body and not just in spirit or as wandering, free-floating soul, why would we make this up?

I mean, that would have been so much more comfortable a claim—that his soul was immortal even if his body were killed and was now rotting in its grave. This would have been a much easier assertion, a much easier *sell*, as the immortality of the soul was already a comfortable claim in the world. It was a claim of the ancient Greeks and Hellenized Ancient Near East. It was a claim of the Gnostics, and of the easy dualism that takes hold everywhere. The material world is gross; the spiritual realm is pure. The body is fallen and dying; the soul is clean and good. All this would have made some strictly spiritual attestation so much easier to make. That Jesus' spirit was out there, making itself felt. That Jesus' lifeforce was on the move, inspiring his friends to live on with thought of him. Why not just say that? Why not just have that be the heart of it? "He's in our thoughts." "He lives on in our hearts." Why insist on the resurrection of Jesus in body?

But that's what the gospel writers did, and that's what those in the early church did, and likely because that's what those earliest witnesses did—Mary and Peter and the beloved disciple of the Gospel of John, Cleopas and his traveling companion on the road to Emmaus, and all the disciples gathered in that locked room we remembered last week. They encountered Jesus, crucified, dead, and now raised, appearing and walking and speaking and even eating. Eating!

Broiled fish.

Seriously?

So, this passage from Luke is especially insistent.

It falls like so many others on that first resurrection day, a day when Jesus is remembered to have shown up in Jerusalem in the locked room; and on the road to Emmaus while Cleopas and another disciple leaving Jerusalem walked along together, likely dejected, likely undone; and now here, still with Cleopas and his companion, but now these two having run back from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell the disciples what had happened—how they had seen him, been joined by him on their walk and then, when they went into where they were staying and when they'd broken bread with this wandering stranger, at last recognized him though at this he would vanish from their sight.

This, of course, would have them run back to Jerusalem, where they'd find the eleven and their companions gathered together, and where those eleven would tell these two just arrived, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" which would have those two tell those eleven, "We saw him, too!" and then all that had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

And then, *then*, while they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

And they were startled and terrified and looked as if they were seeing a ghost. But it wasn't a ghost, it was Jesus, who showed them his hands and his feet, and then had something to eat. To *eat!*

And it doesn't make any sense except to suggest that God doesn't mean just to separate out the ephemeral from the durable of this world; or that God's power to redeem and make to rise presses itself upon the fleshly things of this world and not just the psycho-spiritual things of this world; or that the eschatological hope that death comes to nothing given the power of life can unleash a conviction so urgent that living eschatologically could start now, the end of things breaking into the middle of things so to let loose a power for the good unlike what might, absent this, ever be manifest. Or something like that. I don't know. It's crazy, right?

But that's what they said. And then, for years, centuries, millennia in fact, people kept saying it, and kept figuring it out, running out the logic of it—that flesh and spirit are intertwined, that time and matter are of one weave, that fundamentally things don't really cease to be, just are transformed in their being, a startling continuity amidst an astonishing transformation, while the

problems of existence persist yet so does existence, as if, though we cannot sustain ourselves, and we certainly cannot save ourselves, we are yet sustained and we do have hope of salvation, a perfected creation, worked out of all sin, fulfilled of all purpose, made whole and perfectly sustained, never spent, nothing lost, nothing left as waste, all redeemed. Alleluia!

Alleluia!

What's more, in recent time, while we have indeed striven to establish the ground of our being in terms we can fully understand, without having to make reference to some mysterious God out there but reliant instead on the power of our own reason, it evermore seems the case that what truly stands to reason is that mysterious, all-inclusive God, who creates and sustains all things, who entered time as one of those things, suffered the sin of the world of his making so to open a way to salvation that sin might no longer ensnare. Believe it or not, this is the most reasonable of all the formulations of the world. Everything else requires a faith in the absurd more strenuous than this—chance, contingency hung on no absolutes, strict materialism, as if beings could come irrespective of being, as if incoherence makes sense where coherence is too much to hope for.

I can tell you this because, as it happens, I've long since stopped storing my faith in a sealed room. Since week after week, it showed itself as still holding, since Sunday after Sunday it showed up yet again as reliable, durable, sound, I figured I could give it a good poking, I could open my mind in the faith that, clever as I might be, I was working with a God who was clever again by half at least.

Did you notice that one of the things Jesus appeared among them to do, along with command of them peace and share with them a meal, was to open their minds? This he did following peace and provision: "He opened their minds to understand the scriptures."

And have you noticed, also, that the first movements of Christian faith according to the story itself is a reformation of mind? Repentance. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," John told his first hearers, then Jesus told his first hearers.

And to repent is twofold. In Hebrew, it suggests a return. In Greek, it suggests a change of mind, an enlarging of one's mind and imagining. Together, it is far more than how we tend to hear it. This isn't just about coming clean about all that you've done. It's moreover about approaching God, returning to God, by some transforming of your mind. Enlarging it that you might know God and that you might know as God knows. A grandeur. A majestic sweep in seeking wisdom of all things. This whole movement of faith, of following Jesus, insists upon a habit of mind that is boundless as God Himself is boundless, is curious as God is creative, is

expansive as God is majestic. It's as if our hungry minds might be filled with God's food of truth and mystery, arriving and vanishing, which keeps us in pursuit.

Tragic, then, that much of what's done in the name of faith involve habits of mind that close down and shut out, or fix into place what should be dynamic and evermoving. Tragic that people, in the name of faith, are made incurious, offered a brittle belief system rather than this restless God.

A book I recently read, though which is from thirty years ago, called *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, begins with this assertion: "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind."

I'd been searching for this book, though I hadn't known it was *this* book. I'd been wondering, wondering, what had happened to so many of the minds of my co-religionists? I'd been wondering whereof the minds of so many people who are caught up in the same faith I am caught up in—this faith which I can't stop thinking about, I can't stop poking at, I can't stop listening for in everything from fine art to pop music, from probing science to public policy. I'd been searching for how those minds seemed to have such different habits from mine. At last, I saw it mentioned in a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Mark's Noll's now classic.

I bought it right away.

Noll is himself an evangelical Christian who teaches at Wheaton College, an evangelical college. He comes at this with defenses down, an agenda that might be felt as offensive but doesn't seem to have intended offence. This isn't a polemic. It's a lament, and an urging. In pointing out the problem, he writes that in no field of study or practice, from philosophy to physics to the creation of fine art, are there represented at the top notch any self-professed evangelical Christians.

How this came to be is what this book's about.

For now, though, suffice it to say Noll sees it as a serious problem, and I see it as a needless problem. It doesn't have to be this way. We do not need to worry we might outwit God. We do *not* need to worry we might imagine and wonder and explore and discover our way beyond where God's truth reigns and God's grace pours forth. That is hubris on a whole other order of magnitude.

The fact is, Christian claims are the simplest things going and the deepest mysteries out there to plumb. There's something here for everyone, whether you're ready to set forth in rigor or to repose in peace and assurance, whether you're as a child who just wants to play with love or as scholar who wants to take things apart to see how fearfully and wonderfully it is all made.

What's more, it is the living Lord who'd be first to set out in probing wonder. It is the crucified, dead, resurrected, and now living who'd be the first to set out at the wonder of it all, who indeed has been the first set out in wonder.

We may as ever follow—because the good we seek is durable, can withstand. It might seem like mere ephemera, but it turns out to matter, truly to matter. The truth we rely on will show up, again.

And again.

Don't believe me? Come back next Sunday, and I'll show you.

And the Sunday after that. And the Sunday after that.

Thanks be to God.