

Acts 3:12-19
1 John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48
Psalm 4

Easter 3B
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Easter's Promise

Our readings today take us back in time. Last week, we heard the story of Thomas, the one who had to see for himself, who needed the experience his companions had had in order to believe. Do you remember? Ten of the eleven remaining disciples were in a locked room, hidden away from the authorities they feared would come for them, just as they had come for Jesus. Thomas hadn't been there that Easter Sunday night when Jesus mysteriously appeared, even though they'd locked themselves in. The next week, when his friends told him they'd seen Jesus Thomas wouldn't believe it. *"Unless I put my fingers in the mark of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe"* he'd said. We all know that didn't happen – once he had the experience of Jesus, he no longer needed the proof he'd asked for. Turns out what he needed was the experience of Jesus.

But today, for whatever reason, we've gone back a week, to Easter Sunday night. And for just this one week, we've jumped out of John's gospel into Luke's. Who knows why, especially since we don't even get to hear the best part of this chapter. The story actually begins early on Easter morning when the women brought spices to the tomb so they could anoint Jesus' body. In John's account, only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb that Easter morning, but Luke tells us there were several women. Lots of witnesses, not just one. But they all found the same thing Magdalene found – the stone rolled away, and two angels who said *"He is not here but is risen. Remember? He told you this would happen."*

I love Luke's gospel for so many reasons, but one is surely because when he tells the stories, he tells us how people feel. Do you notice? The women were perplexed when they saw the stone rolled away, and terrified at the sight of the dazzling angels. So when those perplexed and terrified women returned to tell the men, the men pretty much blew them off, calling their account of what had happened, an "idle tale." That's a bad translation. What they really said was the women were *leros* – that's Greek for delirious. But even though they jostled and joked amongst themselves about the crazy women, Peter decided to go see for himself. He found the tomb empty too. We're told he was amazed...

Then comes the story of two followers who were walking away from Jerusalem. They are sad, Luke tells us, and it's easy to see why. They'd seen Jesus crucified three days before. When Jesus died on the cross, everything they'd hoped for, everything they'd worked for, everything they'd changed their lives for died with him. They were so caught up in their sadness that when a stranger came up next to them, they hardly noticed. The stranger asked what they were discussing. The two couldn't believe he didn't know what was going on – everyone in town knew

what was going on. Jesus had been crucified. But there was this very strange thing that happened, they said. The women astounded us with a story of finding the tomb empty but for two angels who told them Jesus had risen.

And then the stranger said how slow of heart they were to understand. That is one of my favorite lines in scripture – Oh how foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had declared... It wasn't their minds that should have recognized him... it was their hearts. And while it turns out their hearts were burning inside them as Jesus interpreted the scriptures that had pointed to him all along, they still didn't know it was him. At least, not until they invited him in for dinner when he blessed and broke the bread, then disappeared from their sight. Of course they immediately ran back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples, and found all of them saying too, that Jesus was alive. And it was *"While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said 'Peace be with you.'"*

That's how our gospel passage today really starts. Not with the words "Jesus himself stood among them and said Peace be with you... "but, *While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them...* They were talking about Jesus having been raised from the dead when Jesus himself stood in their midst bringing God's peace. And they thought they were seeing a ghost. They were startled! They were terrified! They wouldn't, they couldn't believe it. Not one of them. It shouldn't surprise us, really. Even though Jesus had told them again and again that he would suffer, be killed, and three days later be raised from the dead, when Jesus died on the cross, they thought it was over. Death is death. That's what they knew, that's what their life experience had been, that's what had happened.

Jesus was dead, and when he died, all their hopes and dreams of the Kingdom of Heaven died too. That's what they knew. So even though they were talking about resurrection, even though Peter had apparently seen the risen Lord, even though the crazy women had heard it from the angels, even though the two traveling friends had recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread.... they still couldn't believe it.

So just as Jesus invited Thomas into the experience he needed, Jesus invited all of the other disciples into the experience they needed too. He seemed to read their minds, they thinking they were seeing a ghost. *"I'm no ghost"* he told them. *"Look at the nail marks in my hands and my feet. Touch me and know, I am flesh and bones, not an apparition."* And as if to prove his point about being very real and flesh and blood, he said he was hungry and wanted something to eat. And *"while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering,"* they watched him eat a piece of fish. And then he began to warm their hearts by saying the things he had said all along, telling them again of all the things Moses and the prophets had said about him. He opened their minds to understand the ancient scriptures so they could hear the truth that he would suffer, die and be raised.

The disciple's encounter with the risen Christ didn't begin with someone else's story, a theoretical hope, a doctrine or a creed. Neither do ours. They begin with experience. For the

disciples, it was when their hearts grew warm as the Scriptures came alive and were true for them. Finally, they all had their own rich and real experience of the risen Christ and resurrection came true for them. And from that point on, they were to be witnesses, Jesus told them. Their lives were to be resurrection stories that carried the abiding presence of the living, loving God.

This is what it is to be Christian community – not a people gathered around facts or ideas, but a people gathered around their stories and experiences of the living God. Yes, we have creeds and yes, we're grateful for our good, God given minds that help us to interpret scripture and other wisdom passed down to us. But our minds aren't the places God comes alive. *"Oh how foolish you are and slow of heart"* Jesus had said to them. Not slow of mind, slow of heart. That is where God comes alive for us - in our hearts.

Resurrection isn't something we can prove, isn't something that is knowable or even decidable. Resurrection is the presence of the living God so strong that not even death can diminish it. We are the Body of Christ not because we believe certain things or say certain things or even pray certain things. We are the Body of Christ because we practice resurrection. What does it mean to practice resurrection? Jesus had a lot to say about that. To practice resurrection is to proclaim repentance – to turn ourselves around, to reorient ourselves, and point ourselves in the Godward direction – not just with our lips, but in the way we live our lives.

And once we've repented, having turned our lives Godward, practicing resurrection is, of course, practicing forgiveness, knowing the forgiving sets us free. What was it Jesus said? *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* John 20:23

To practice resurrection is to love God above all, and to want only what God wants. It is to love our neighbor – remembering everyone is our neighbor – that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Not love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves (which is probably a dicey proposition anyway, but to love our neighbors as though they ARE ourselves because we really are all one. To practice resurrection is to bear witness to Christ's resurrection, to tell the resurrection stories from two thousand years ago and to tell the resurrection stories of our lives today. We practice resurrection by living lives that pour God's redeeming and reconciling love into the world. The point isn't to go back in time and try to imagine ourselves in a locked upper room or having breakfast on the beach. The point is to live into what it means to be a part of a community that bears witness, that practices resurrection in the here and now. You see, each time we practice resurrection – each time we repent or forgive or love with abandon, we bear witness to the resurrection, so that some little part of the world becomes whole again. And that, my dears, is Easter's promise. Amen