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First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

Luke 24:35-49 (NRSV)

Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

[36] While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." [37] They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. [38] He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? [39] 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." [40] And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. [41] While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" [42] They gave him a piece of broiled fish, [43] and he took it and ate in their presence.

[44] 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." [45] Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, [46] 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, [47] and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. [48] You are witnesses of these things. [49] And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

WOULD YOU BELIEVE?

At our Bible study this past week, a former teacher told of a morning ritual that her students loved. Under the heading, "Would you believe?" she would write true facts that were hard to believe. She said that when she had to be

absent for a few days the children really missed starting the day thinking about things that were strange but true.

I can believe it.

Ripley's Believe It or Not has made an industry out of publishing unusual facts and stories.

I remember reading Ripley's with my grandfather, and he would always say, "I would rather not believe that!" There are many who are in my grandfather's camp when it comes to believing the unusual. There are some things that seem just too strange to be true ... or too good to be true.

A BATTLEFIELD RESURRECTION

In the second battle of Bull Run, Captain Clark and his men were surrounded by the southern forces. But, they refused to surrender. His detachment was nearly wiped out, and Captain Clark was listed as missing in action.

Hearing about the battle the family assumed the worst. They sent a telegram asking that the Captain's body be returned for a proper burial as soon as possible.

But, Clark was not dead. He hid behind enemy lines for three days. Despite suffering from exposure, he finally made his way back to headquarters ... just as the telegram arrived from his family. Clark answered their telegram himself. His tongue in cheek message read,

"Still have use for the body. Will bring it back in person!"

I wish I could have been there when Captain Clark's family received that telegram. I suspect there would have been great joy and relief.

But, I also think that there would have been a bit of doubt and confusion as well. After all in the fog of war mistakes are made. The news seemed almost

too good to be true. They would only be able to truly believe when they were able to see and touch their loved one for themselves.

SKEPTICAL DISCIPLES

And that was the case for the disciples long ago. Would you believe that God would raise a man from the dead? Those first disciples couldn't believe. It was just too strange and frightening. It was too good to be true.

The disciples have a lot in common with modern men and women. We too are very skeptical about what God can do. We believe that if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably isn't true.

For several years now a group of biblical scholars who call themselves the Jesus Seminar have been causing quite a stir in the religious world. They have questioned whether the sayings of Jesus as we have them in the Bible are really his words.

And their radical conclusion is that very few of the words attributed to Jesus in the gospels were actually spoken by Him. Instead, according to this group, the stories we have in the gospels represent what we might call the wishful thinking of the early church.

To put it another way, these scholars depict the followers of Jesus as getting together after the horrible, bloody crucifixion and saying,

“Gee, it's almost like he's still with us.

Let's all hold hands and try to believe real hard that he's still here.”

CRUCIFIXION

Now, I don't know about you, but I find that hard to believe! Wishful thinking can't hold a candle to the power of a crucifixion. The crucifixion was designed by the Romans to crush hope, and it did a good job. We talk

about lethal injection being cruel and unusual punishment but it's a cake walk compared to a crucifixion.

It's a hard film to watch, but Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ" really helps us understand the destructive nature of a crucifixion. It was the epitome of evil.

It was not just about executing a person. It was a death designed to fill people with doubt and fear. It was their method of dealing with "terrorists" who would dare to challenge the power and authority of Rome. The terrorists might not be afraid of dying for their country, but they would be afraid of crucifixion.

And in the gospels we read that the crucifixion of Jesus had the desired effect upon His disciples. They met behind closed doors because they were afraid.

When the women came from the tomb with stories about an empty tomb and angels, the disciples dismissed what they had to say as an "idle tale". They were not about to cross those political and religious authorities who had so brutally murdered Jesus.

Today's lesson begins with the disciples trying to make sense out of another incredible story that had come their way. It seems that Jesus had appeared to Simon and a couple of their friends on the road to Emmaus.

THE REACTION TO JESUS

And while they were trying to understand what these new reports might mean, Jesus himself appears to them. The Scripture tells us He stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Now surely this should have been enough to calm all their fears and end all their doubts. But, just the opposite is true. The disciples did not feel at ease when Christ appeared. The presence of Christ evoked fear instead of faith.

If you think that the scholars of the Jesus Seminar are skeptical, just look at the disciples. In the presence of the risen Christ they are overwhelmed with fear and doubt. They were terrified.

The disciples weren't thinking when they saw Jesus,
"Wow, he is risen, just as He said."
No, they were thinking, "Quick, call the Ghost Busters!"

The disciples may have come from the first century, but they were certainly no fools. They knew that "dead men tell no tales," and they knew that when a person is crucified, dead and buried, they stay that way.

But, those deeply held beliefs were being challenged by the appearance of Jesus. The world as they knew it was gone. No wonder they were afraid. The resurrection was a totally new thing. They had no way of understanding or accepting what they were seeing.

Jesus gently chided the disciples for their lack of faith, but He also offered them a way to understand and believe. And Jesus helps us understand and believe as well. Two points I want to emphasize this morning. He invited the disciples to touch him, and then Jesus taught His disciples from the Scriptures.

INVITED TO TOUCH

First, Jesus invited them to touch him. He said,
"Look at my hands and feet. A ghost wouldn't have flesh and bones as I do."

And to further impress upon them the fact that it was him "in the flesh" he asked for something to eat. Not many ghosts are able to eat broiled fish! A risen Savior who could be touched was an important part of the witness of the early church.

In the first letter of John the apostle writes about those things that the disciples had seen with their eyes and touched with their hands. (I John 1:1) The early church knew God through His Son to be a touchable God.

Oh, if only we could know God in the same way. If only Jesus could appear to us and invite us to touch Him in this way. Perhaps many of our doubts and fears would be alleviated if only we could have an experience such as this.

But, I believe that Jesus does still invite us to touch him.

THE TOUCH OF CHRIST TODAY

According to the apostle, Paul, the disciples of Jesus (insofar as they do his will) become the body of Christ. In a sense, we become the Christ to others when we touch them in His name. The Bible teaches us that when the church is filled with the Spirit of Christ and tends to the needs of a broken world, the church mediates the presence of Christ.

More than that, the Bible also teaches that as we touch those who have been broken by life, Christ touches us. We begin to experience in the wounded ones the very presence of Christ.

Whenever doubt and fear start taking over my life, I have found it helpful to look for encouragement in a most unusual place. I spend some time with those who are really hurting, those who are filled with grief, those who are shut-in or those who are critically ill.

For me, it's not just about doing my job. It's about discovering the presence of Christ in those who are most needy.

Paradoxically, we sometimes find the greatest hope where people are wounded. That shouldn't come as a shock to those of us who know Jesus as Savior.

He still offers hope by inviting us to touch his nail-scarred body. He still offers hope in those places where body is broken and blood is shed.

HERE AMONG US

Did you notice how the Bible describes the coming of the risen Christ to his disciples?

There is no dramatic entrance. There no walking through walls or appearing in a puff of smoke. Instead, the Bible simply tells us that He “came and stood among them”. It was as if He had been there all along but now their eyes were opened to his presence.

I think that this is how it is with us.

Jesus is with us always. But, often we do not have the capacity to perceive his presence. We must be open to the fact that the presence of the risen Christ comes to us “disguised” in the form of one who is among us.

Sometimes the human touch can also be the very touch of God.

C.S. Lewis once said that when we carry out our religious duties, we are like people digging channels in a waterless land. At the time our exercise might seem fruitless. But, when the water comes we will be ready.

For those of us who find the landscape of our life to be barren, I would suggest that we must persevere in digging channels of faith. We must continue to do what faith requires, helping our brother or sister in need.

And one day we will find that it did make a difference, that in the person we helped we experienced the very presence of the risen Christ. We reached out and touched flesh and blood ... and found ourselves touching God.

HE TAUGHT THEM

In addition to touching his disciples, the risen Christ also taught them.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught the disciples and the crowds. But, though He taught them, many times they did not understand. And when they did understand, they didn't like what they heard, especially the parts about a Messiah who was going to suffer.

But, now the words of Scripture are explained by the risen Christ, and that makes all the difference. For the first time the disciples are able to understand and accept what they hear. The Bible tells us that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scripture."

They begin to see everything differently. Scripture comes alive when it is taught by the risen Christ. That was true then, and it is still true now.

THE BIBLE STUDY

A minister was planning Christian education for her church, and whenever she would poll the adults in the congregation about what sort of educational experience they would prefer, the answer would always be the same. They wanted Bible studies.

So, taking this at face value, she would arrange for Bible studies of the finest sort, even contacting professors at a nearby theological seminary to come and teach these classes.

And how did it all work out? She said, "They stayed away in droves!"

Finally, it dawned on her that when the people asked for Bible study, what they really wanted was not information about the Bible but an experience of God. Asking for Bible study was the only way they knew to ask for what they really wanted, knowing God in a personal way.

So, she began a different Bible study, one that turned out to be much more successful. She said, “I laid off the seminary professors and offered a class on biblical meditation instead.”

CONNECTING OUR STORY WITH HIS STORY

The point of Bible study is to connect our story with His story. The point of Bible study is to be inspired by the Spirit, to cultivate belief and become a faithful disciple. The point of Bible study is to have our hearts and minds stirred by the wind of the Spirit.

We must approach the study of Scripture with an open mind. We must attempt to lay aside all of our preconceived notions and be truly ready to accept God’s leading.

It is then that our minds will be opened by the Spirit of the risen Christ. It is then that we will be able to understand what before was above and beyond us.

Jesus called those first disciples to be his witnesses (Luke 24:48), and Jesus calls us to be witnesses as well.

But, in order to witness effectively the word must become flesh in our lives. In order to witness effectively our hearts must burn with passion and hope when we read the Scriptures.

In short the Spirit of Christ must fill us in a way that transforms our life.

A FAILED WITNESS

As a young man, Mahatma Gandhi studied in London. After learning about Christianity, and after reading the Sermon on the Mount, he decided that Christianity was the most complete religion in the world.

It was only later, when he lived with a Christian family in East India, that he changed his mind. In that household he discovered that the word rarely became flesh ...that the teaching of Jesus rarely became the reality of Jesus.

In the final analysis, faith is not a matter of scriptures memorized and doctrines learned. Faith is experiencing the living presence of Christ.

If Jesus did not come and stand among us, if Jesus did not speak to us and reassure us, there would be no believing, no worship and no faith.

HE IS HERE!

But, today on the third Sunday of Easter we remember that Jesus has come and stood among us. That is the whole point of our worship today. We are here to touch each other and hear the promises together.

And when we do that, we sense a presence that has been with us all along.

A preacher told of a group that was discussing the need for more evangelism in their congregation. In order to attract new members they were thinking about why they came to that particular church.

Some said that they enjoyed the fellowship.
Others said that they loved the music.
Thankfully one fellow even said that he liked the preaching!

And then Mary told the group why she came to that church. She said, "I keep coming back, have done so for twenty years, because, of all the places in my life, it is this place that I experience most vividly the presence of Christ.

I have hardly ever come here without feeling, at some point in the service, or in conversations before or after, that Jesus is here. That's why I want to be here."

I think Mary's answer is the best. That's the whole point of the preaching, the music and the fellowship. We need to see Jesus. We need to touch Him. We need to have our hearts burn with hope. That's what I want for you and me this very day.

JESUS IS LORD

You see Easter not only means “Jesus lives” but also “Jesus is Lord.”
Jesus was raised from the dead long ago.
But, He also reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords today.

When we say “He is risen” we are talking not only about life after death but also about life here and now. We are talking about who is in charge. We are talking about the One who is present with us even when our fears keep us huddled behind locked doors like those first disciples long ago.

A distinguished theologian has written,
“There is an insufferable pettiness in much of the church today. We seem too timid to make very large claims about the goodness and work of God.

We limit ourselves to small assertions: God is the one who helps you feel better. God helps you make it through the day. God is reduced to a slogan that you can put on a bracelet or around your neck.”

OUR GOD IS TOO SMALL

Several years ago another writer made the same point in a book entitled, *Your God is Too Small*. He was right. Our God is too small.

And we need to change that. We need to remember God is not the great therapist in the sky. God is the Creator of heaven and the earth.

And this mighty, holy God has come near to us in Jesus Christ.
He has come so close that we can feel his touch and hear his voice.

May the Spirit of God come upon us this day and clothe us with power from upon high.
(Luke 24:49)

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN