

Third Sunday of Eastertide

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

Luke 24:36b-48. Jesus has risen from the dead, and has appeared both to Mary Magdalene and to his disciples. Luke tells us that they give witness to his resurrection with the words, “The Lord has risen indeed” (24:34). But it is one thing to give witness, and it is another thing to understand it or let your ministry be shaped by it! That is the dilemma in which the disciples find themselves in today’s Gospel lesson.

Jesus has before him a major task in regards to his disciples. Responsibility for carrying out Jesus’ work in building the kingdom of God and advancing God’s intentions for humanity has now shifted from Jesus to his disciples. They must now take up this mission, and do so in Jesus’ stead. But before they do that, a major impediment must be removed – the impediment of a lack of understanding of the implications of Jesus’ resurrection and of the way that resurrection impacts the very way the disciples carry out their mission.

In what is an extremely compacted statement, Jesus undertakes the task of preparing his disciples for the world-transforming work that they are to be about. That task consists of two elements. First, Jesus must help them to understand the nature of his resurrection. Second, he must enable them to grasp the biblical foundations of his work as Messiah. The first instruction occurs in vss. 38-43, and the second in verses 44-48.

First, Jesus helps the disciples to understand the nature of his resurrection. What would you think if one you loved and followed rose from the dead? What could you think? You would likely think – until you had deeply reflected upon it – what the conventional wisdom of your day would teach you about resurrection. And the conventional wisdom of that day would have taught that (a) people don’t rise from the dead; (b) if they *seem to do so*, that is likely the rising of a spirit or ghost or it is a restored cadaver that was not truly or thoroughly killed and is now resuscitated. One or the other of these theories is likely what the disciples believed. And Jesus had to disabuse them of such assumptions.

Jesus says to the frightened disciples, “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” (vs. 39). Jesus first demonstrates to the disciples that he is, indeed, flesh and bone. He urges the disciples, not only to look at him and his wounds, but also to touch and feel him. He is, indeed, not a ghost, a spirit or a phantom; he’s a real live human being.

Second, he asks for something to eat, and eats a piece of boiled fish before them (vs. 41-42) – something no cadaver could do.

By initiating these two actions, Jesus has accomplished two things. First, he has undercut two popular views of the afterlife held by most of the Roman world – that is, that after you die, you either become a spirit (ghost) or a cadaver. Second, he has embraced the Jewish belief of life being an embodied existence. For most of Israelite history, the Jews believed that such embodiment occurred only before death, but by the time of Jesus, theological speculation had broken into two competing camps: the Pharisees (who believed that one’s embodied existence

continued beyond the grave) and the Sadducees (who believed that one's embodied existence ceased at the grave).¹ By using his own resurrection as prime example, Jesus demonstrates to the disciples that *resurrection of the body* (not immortality of the soul) is the final state of humanity – and therefore, the truth they can proclaim and the hope they can offer to the world as the heart of the gospel! .

Second, Jesus enables his disciples to grasp the biblical foundations of his work as Messiah – and consequently, their work, as well. Jesus wants to demonstrate to his disciples that his ministry, death and resurrection are not an aberration of salvation history, but are the center, the zenith and the denouement of God's intentions for humanity. They need to learn to read their Bible in a new and liberating way – and that way, Jesus begins to reveal to them in this encounter.

“Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (vs. 44), Jesus tells them. The formula, “Moses, the prophets and the psalms” are the three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible – that is, the Torah or Law, the prophets (including the historical books) and the writings (including the Psalms, but also Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon). In other words, Jesus is declaring to his disciples that his coming, mission, death and resurrection is at the very heart and moves throughout the entirety of the Hebrew Bible – the only Bible for Jews, even Christian Jews in that day.

And what is that message that moves through the warp-and-woof of scripture, Jesus in essence asks? “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” (vss. 46-47).

The key to understanding this scripture is the use by Luke of three parallel verbs in the infinitive: (1) “the Messiah is *to suffer*”, (2) “*to rise* from the dead on the third day”, and (3) “repentance for forgiveness of sins is *to be proclaimed* in his name to all nations”.² “*To suffer, to rise, to be proclaimed*”. Here is the gospel in a nutshell.

“To suffer” does not simply mean the scourging of Jesus. Rather, Luke uses the term frequently to express the full passion of Jesus – from his earliest ministry through his betrayal, trial, beating and crucifixion. The Hebrew Scriptures, Luke declares, deal repeatedly with the suffering of God's chosen one.

But Luke presents an even more-intriguing juxtaposition of ideas. He states, “*The Messiah is to suffer!*” This is an utterly shocking statement, because to the Hebrew mind of Jesus' day, these two concepts – “the Messiah” and “is to suffer” -- don't belong together. The Messiah was envisioned by all Jews (the Jerusalem clergy aristocracy and priesthood as well as the peasants and farmers) to be the figure of a conquering hero – one who would drive the hated Gentile

¹ Paul the Apostle made very astute and strategic use of this theological division by dividing-and-conquering the Sanhedrin in their trial of him, successfully getting them to change the issue from allegiance to Jesus to a question about the resurrection (Acts 23:6-10).

² This insight is developed fully by Joel B. Green, in his commentary, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 856-858.

rulers out of Israel and restore the land to Jewish hegemony. He wasn't going to suffer, for goodness sake! The Son of Man or the Servant of Isaiah 40-66 would suffer. But not the Messiah! For Jesus to bring these two ideas together would create a major cognitive dissonance in the disciples – even at this point in their association with Jesus.

But Jesus is here telling the disciples that, if they are to read the Hebrew Bible discerningly, they will see that “the Messiah is to suffer” and die! Thus, with this statement, Jesus demonstrates to the disciples that the issue with which they have so long struggled – how could Jesus be the divine Messiah and yet suffer – is no issue at all. His suffering and death was what the Bible teaches us all along is what the Messiah is to be about – because only in that way could humanity be redeemed. Status does not come by domination, controlling society or lording it over others (even lording it over the Romans) – which was the popular but unbiblical understanding of the Messiah. Rather, it was by “taking on the form of a servant and humbling himself, becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).

But life doesn't end in a grave, Jesus contends. Messiah is also “to rise from the dead on the third day”. Messiah's apparently tragic death ends with the triumphant cry, “The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!” Jesus is alive, the resurrected One proclaims. He is not a dead body, lying in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Nor is he a ghost, phantasmically moving around the earth but unable to impact it. Neither is he a resuscitated cadaver. Jesus is – well, Jesus! Jesus still! Jesus alive! Jesus working through his Church to bring to reality God's intentions for humanity. And thus, it is this resurrected Jesus who empowers his people to carry on the work he began, multiplying him throughout the world in a way he could never accomplish by himself. He is risen, indeed!

Finally, scripture tells the disciples (and us) of their task, as they work for a resurrected Lord. “Repentance for forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (vs. 47). Now that they have not only seen the Messiah suffer and die, but also have seen him, touched him and been with him in his resurrected body, they are to move out into the world, starting with Jerusalem, to share and live out and practice the building of God's kingdom – the shalom community of vital relationship with God, justice and equitable distribution of wealth “so that there are no poor among you”. Thus, the missiological task of the disciples is summarized in their call, “You are witnesses of these things” (vs. 48). You went through with Jesus the terrible experience of his betrayal, trial and crucifixion, as the powers of Rome and of the Jerusalem Clergy Aristocracy conspired and acted together to eliminate him. You experienced the reality of his resurrection, personally meeting with, holding and touching him – and thus, knowing that he had indeed risen from the dead. You have seen that the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as specific passages, proclaims Messianic suffering and resurrection, providing you with the biblical foundations for your experience of him. Now – go! Get out there in the world filled with Roman oppressors, wealthy exploiters and priestly controllers, and work for the reforming of that world back into the world God created and intended it to be. For you are disciples of Jesus Christ – his hands, his feet, his arms of compassion, his heart alive today and at work throughout the world!

Psalm 4. I wonder if Jesus thought of this prayer when faced with making the transition from his own assumption of mission to the disciples' assumption of their responsibility to work for the kingdom of God? The psalm describes a poet who feels totally inadequate for the task given him by God. "Answer me when I call, O God of my right! Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer" (4:1). Do those being called to this new mission feel adequately prepared for the task? No! Are they adequately prepared? No! Is the task upon them, whether or not they feel prepared? Yes! So what will they do?

"There are many who say, 'O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord'" (4:6)! Some will complain. Some will refuse the call. Some will obfuscate. Some will change the subject. Some will blame God (or the teachers, or the system, or anyone else) for their lack of preparation. But the demand is upon them. So what must the authentic disciple do?

"I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety" (vs. 8). The task to which we may be called may be great – even intimidating and overwhelming. But no matter! The question is whether we can trust God to hear our prayers of inadequacy, make our narrow opinions of our capacities wide (vs. 1) and give us the gift of simply trusting that God will do the work of transformation through us (vss. 7-8). By not worrying whether we are adequate but by simply doing that to which God has called us, we will discover that "(God) has put gladness in our hearts more than when our grain and wine abound" (vs. 7)!

Acts 3:12-19. Peter and John go to the Jerusalem Temple "at the hour of prayer" (Acts 3:1), presumably to participate in the Temple worship of God. In the vestibule of the Temple, they meet a man "lame from birth" who seeks alms from them. Peter responds with the magnificent words, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (3:6). The man, now healed, enters into the Temple with the two apostles, loudly praising God and thus drawing a crowd. Peter, recognizing that some explanation is in order and taking advantage of the curiosity of the crowd, preaches his second sermon. That sermon makes up today's lesson from the book of Acts.

The speech given by Peter consists of three points. First, he theologically interprets the healing of this lame beggar, apparently well known by all who came to the Temple (vss. 12-13). Second, he proclaims the essential gospel message (vss. 13-18). Lastly, Peter issues a call to repentance (vs. 19).

First, Peter makes explanation for the man's healing. "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this (man's healing), or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him well? By faith in the name (of Jesus), his name itself has made this man strong" (vss. 12, 16a). This miracle of healing, of liberation of this man occurred not through the power or spirituality of Peter and John, but through the action of God that came through belief in Jesus.

Second, Peter then proclaims to the Jews gathered around him the essential gospel message. That is done through a rather profound sequence. First, Peter states that Jesus was the servant of God, thus doing God's will. Second, he simply states that "you handed over and rejected (him) in the presence of Pilate", and in doing so "you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and killed

the Author of life” (vss. 13-14). Peter doesn’t present a theology of Jesus’ redemptive death, but simply tells the story of his betrayal, trial and crucifixion. But what is most notable about this presentation is that he states that “you” were responsible for Jesus’ death.

Now, obviously, none of those who were likely standing around listening to Peter personally acted to get Jesus killed. In fact, Luke (as did all the writers of all the gospels) squarely places the responsibility for Jesus’ death upon both the Jewish and Roman political, economic and religious systems. It was the “powers” that killed Jesus, not the “people”.

So why would Peter place responsibility for Jesus’ death upon the people? It was because they were complicit in that death. By not getting engaged in the political process, by allowing the “powers” to run Israel for their own profit and domination, by not calling the systems to accountability, they had acquiesced in and thus cooperated in the death of “the Author of life”.

A question that begs to be asked, of course, is why did the crowd so meekly accept Peter’s assessment of their culpability? Why did they not protest or become angry at such an accusation? Could it be because they knew that Peter had denied Jesus three times (Luke 22:54-62), thus himself contributing to his own Master’s death? Peter is among the “you”, for he is as guilty as they are. In this way, Peter is a “wounded healer”, for it is only by having been a part of the cowardly that he can now perceive his faithlessness and thus call the faithless to join him in repentance.

Peter then concludes his proclamation of the essential gospel message by making a third point, a brilliant action that shifts his accusation of complicity from blame to the creation of an atmosphere for repentance. “And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer” (vss. 17-18). It is not that the people (or even himself), even though complicit in bringing about Jesus’ death, acted “with malice and forethought”. They acted without understanding the implications of their own action or inaction. Thus, Luke has Peter suggest in this passage what Luke had Jesus declare at his crucifixion, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). The people acted in what they perceived as their own best self-interest (even if that was to preserve their own lives – as did Peter – or to survive by “just getting along” – as did the people). But they did so without understanding the salvation history in which they were involved or the redemptive act God was accomplishing through their complicity.

Peter then draws his brief but extremely compact sermon to its end. God did not allow the Author of life to end in death. “God raised (him) from the dead” (vs. 15). And now, God offers to all who hear this message the opportunity for liberation through this now resurrected Jesus, just as he offered it to the lame man who embraced it and thus can now walk. “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out” – even the sin of being complicit in the execution of the Author of life (vs. 19)!

I John 3:1-7 is the Epistle lesson for the third Sunday of Eastertide. It deals with what God has done for us Christians through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It begins with a most powerful metaphor.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God – and that is what we are” (3:1)! We are “children” of God – not by dint of our creation as those made “in the image of God”, but because of the redemptive work already done on our behalf at Calvary. It was the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus that atoned for our sin and complicity, and now makes us whole. That act of atonement was accomplished once and for all time – at the cross. Thus, it is at the cross that we are made children of God.

But not all embrace that salvific work of Christ. The world has not accepted God’s love in Christ; hence, it does not “know”³ God in a personal and dynamic way (cf. John 17:16). And because they do not “know” God, they do not “know” or understand what kind of community we Christians actually are. Thus, they assign to our actions the kind of motives and priorities that would accompany their actions as people concerned only with building their own dominance, wealth and power.

But our intention as the community of faith is entirely different than the intentions of the world. Our desire is to be like Christ in our priorities, our actions and in our commitments. We want nothing more than to be “like him”, working in society “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to those in prison, to recover the sight of the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor⁴” (Lk. 4:18-19). Thus, we of the Church are called as “children of God” to be revolutionaries for Christ, bringing to society Jesus’ radical new way that builds God’s shalom community of justice, equity, elimination of poverty and dynamic relationship with God!

John then goes on to write the shocking words, “No one who abides in Christ sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous” (vss. 6-7). Does John mean what he says – that once you become a Christian, you no longer sin?

What John is presenting here is what was later formulated in the Reformed doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints”. That doctrine can be simply stated in four words: “Once saved, always saved!”

The sin to which John is referring here is the sin of apostasy. He doesn’t mean that Christians don’t have lapses from time-to-time and never act selfishly! What John is stating here is that once a person is embraced by Christ and embraces Christ (and, consequently, the Christ-life) he

³ It is important to remember that the Hebrew concept of knowledge was not comparable to our western understanding of knowledge. When we use the word “to know”, we mean “to have accumulated sufficient data or information”, whereas to the Hebrew, to “know” was to be in the most intense personal relationship with someone (thus, it was used to describe sexual intercourse, for example). A vestige of that insight still exists in modern English, when we talk about “knowing” someone – meaning that we have a personal acquaintanceship with them. But it is no way as intense a use of the word “to know” as it was both among the ancient Hebrews and the earliest Christians who filled the Greek word, *ginosko* with Hebrew content, so that they would use the word “to know” to describe the depth of the existential relationship each Christian and the Christian community would have with Jesus and God.

⁴ “To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” was a standard expression in Hebrew literature for proclaiming and working for the Year of Jubilee. Jubilee was designed to systematically and regularly redistribute the wealth of the nation both so that poverty would be eliminated and power and wealth would not accrue in the hands of a self-selected few.

can never abandon the faith. And he cannot abandon the faith because God cannot abandon him! Once you have “known” God through Christ (think “sexual-intercourse”), you can’t “un-know” God (you can’t undo the act of intercourse, as if it never happened).

Putting it in terms of being “revolutionaries for Christ” (as developed above), what John is stating is that once you have committed yourself to Christ’s cause of building the shalom community, and have been claimed by Christ for that ministry, you can’t “un-do” it. You can’t reject that entire way of understanding and acting upon the world as God intended. *If you do reject it, that is an indication that you never accepted it in the first place – no matter how committed you seemed to be to it at the time!*

What John is teaching us in this passage is that if you have been chosen by God for Christ’s kingdom, and you have embraced that choice, you cannot later reject that call. You persevere as a “saint” of God, not because of your perseverance, but because of God’s perseverance with you! You can’t “unknow” him or his mission! You have joined his revolutionary force – and there’s no turning back!

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