

April 15, 2018

(Luke 24: 36b - 48)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There are fifty-two Sundays, fifty-two opportunities to consider and preach the gospel. But in my mind, considering the state of the world and the current state of the church, there is NO greater message than the one coming out of the readings for today. Not Christmas. Not even Easter Day. Those two messages are the core, for sure. But for those of us who attend church fairly regularly, I think the readings for today are IT.

That does not seem right. After all, Christmas is the celebration of God actually coming to be with us...empowering, enabling us to enter into a personal relationship with God. This is not the God of idols, not the God of remoteness, not the God of "out there" or "hands off"...but rather this is the God here for you and me. And as for Easter, we hear the message that this Son of God, the man who was killed, came back...was raised from the dead. What could be bigger than that?

As I stand here from week to week, I sometimes get the feeling that you could get tired of hearing the constant refrain about Jesus. Like it is, "OK, enough already." Or worse yet, that it would be easier to just tune out for ten minutes until the Nicene Creed because it is the same voice giving the same general "blah, blah, blah" week after week. Well, it is no different in any other church...so I do not mean it personally with you. Because again, in considering the state of the world, and the current state of the church, what do we have?

We have questions of belief, largely based upon modern science. We have a greater Christian church full of foggy, indecisive, or insecure faith. There are documented incidents of a few bishops who do not really believe, so why should you or I be any different? We have a disconnect without passion...it is like hearing stories about the Civil War battle of Gettysburg...interesting history to some, but really...who cares? What does that old museum stuff have to do with me, and my life? At least, on the surface, you are here, waiting to find out. The rest of the world looks on these church building as museums, all right. And it is getting worse. After all, who goes to Fort Stanwix in Rome? And Erie Canal Village outside of town...when it is even open?

I can go on, but that would be redundant. It is all redundant...because none of this is new. None of it.

2,000 years after the fact, we hear the story of some man who died and was buried. Then, suddenly, just after the body starts to decompose, it is Raised, they say. Well, forget 2000 years. Maybe our world can be forgiven its disbelief, because in Luke's story, the body was barely cold and his dearest, closest friends did not believe it either. The body was barely cold...and they all said, "No way."

Luke's story is matter-of-fact, no nonsense, the straight-out story of Jesus. This Jesus had the eye of the tiger. The ultimate goal scorer. He tells of the Jesus who saw his mission in life early, and never strayed or deviated from that path...even to the end. But, at the end...the story does not end. In Luke's tell-it-like-it-was style, we hear more of it today. And Luke pulls no punches...exactly the kind of in-your-face storytelling that we need in this day and age as much as he needed to tell it then.

This was not resuscitation, but resurrection. In resuscitation, biological life is restored but the individual remains mortal and must experience biological death again. Resurrection, on the other hand, is not a restoration of biological life, but rather a transformation from mortality to immortality.

Do we understand this? The difference in definition is easy enough as a mental exercise, but the rest? Luke tells us...here are the facts, here is the truth. Here is Jesus, after death. And Luke makes the point as strongly as he can: Jesus not only came back, but he came back as a guy with a body. Once a dead man, but a dead man no longer. Not a ghost from the haunts of the dead, but back as a guy with a body. Count the scars. Touch him, because once you are resurrected, being treated as a ghost is something of an insult. He is as real as they are. As real as you are. Luke says he is as real as you are sitting in that pew. Hungry for food, asking "Have you anything here to eat?" Why add that to the story? Because ghosts do not get hungry. Takes broiled fish...detail Luke thinks we need...and eats it. He eats it.

Who cares if you were there to see it or not? It happened, says Luke, and that is it. No fluff. No chaff. No embellishment. Jesus of Nazareth blew onto the scene. He did this and that, with power and presence, with grace and love. And the story builds up and up, following the great prophecies of the ages to be crucified to death and be buried. And now? He is eating fish.

Now, here is the urgency...the point for us. Luke's gospel...and the entire New Testament...was first told, and later written, decades and even centuries after the actual events being told. During the actual events themselves, they were seemingly clueless. Fishermen and others by trade. Not theologians. They did not have the eye of the tiger. They did not see the mission. Did not get it. Days after the cross, they hide in fear of their lives. Unsure. Lost. Lacking direction. With no future. Kind of like the greater church of today.

And then...wham! Luke says...it is real. Jesus comes back with a body. All bodies are important to God...even bodies that were dead...whether you define death as physical, or spiritual, or both. He threatens his disciples with life. Makes them REALLY understand scripture, and that they are to become carriers of resurrection, contagious with forgiveness. Carriers of resurrection...contagious with forgiveness.

So now, in the very face of Roman soldiers and Jewish authorities looking to crucify anyone in sight, they go wild. Cannot contain themselves. Nothing can hold them back. Nothing can stop them.

Peter gets it. He is a witness to Jesus being alive again, so Peter knows there is power to heal that disabled man who begs at the gate of the Temple. There are no coins to put in his cup, but by the power of Jesus, the Resurrected One, Peter pulls him up, and the beggar goes off dancing. The authorities are not amused, so Peter gets hauled off to court, and there he talks about this Jesus back from the dead with a body. Straight-talking Peter...a carrier of resurrection, and positively contagious with forgiveness, all because the first one has come back alive from the whipping, the cross, and the grave.

God makes bodies, resurrects them, and sustains them. For God, they are something holy, whether the body of Jesus, or yours, or mine...and it looks as though God does not tell the difference. When do we get that, in our hearts? And because there are bodies all over: natural, spiritual, sacramental....Jesus shows up, complete with body, there in the Upper Room, here on our altar, and in each of us as his Church. Jesus shows up...he tells us himself...not as a ghost, but as a body, somehow in the sick, the poor, the hungry. He still asks us that question: "Have you anything here to eat?" He shows up, not as a ghost, but in the bodies of all around us. The world, and we, may threaten him with death, but he threatens us with life.

In the coming months, we will all have a conversation as Jesus recruits witnesses to move out. Those of us who recognize his witness become witnesses ourselves. By the power of the Spirit, through the grace of God, we will become contagious with the forgiveness we have caught...and, like Peter and the other apostles, we will become carriers of resurrection.

That is what this back-to-life Jesus wants of us. Not names on a list. Not occupants in the pews. But witnesses. Not airy spirits or pious ghosts, but bodies like his own with wounds to show, bodies that witness to resurrection, threatening the world with life...because the only Easter some people may ever see is the Easter they see in us as the witnesses of the living God, in the name of the One who makes all bodies, redeems them, and sanctifies them, as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit. Amen.