

Sermon Text: Luke 24:36-48

Now, this is an odd bit of Scripture. Here's the situation. The disciples were afraid that Jesus was a ghost! What does he do to assuage their fears? He says look at my hands and my feet and do you have anything to eat. He eats a piece of broiled fish. Imagine that you are brave, and that you are inspired, and you are witnessing your faith to someone who thinks that Jesus is just another teacher, and you say no, no, no, he was God in flesh, and what is our big proof? Well, it is Easter, that death could not hold Him. Imagine that they say they just don't believe in a physical resurrection, and you point out to them this passage and the fact that it was included to help us believe, that Jesus ate fish! If people don't believe in the resurrection then they certainly are not going to be convinced by the fact that He ate fish. You have to wonder why was this included. It could be that some of us even today do not really believe in any sort of physical resurrection, and maybe the story does speak to us.

In this very same chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was speaking to some followers on the road to Emmaus who did not recognize who He was until they sat down at a meal and broke bread to begin the meal. Then he opened to them the Scriptures and He explained that the prophets predicted that the Messiah must suffer, and these followers who had the Scriptures opened to them in Emmaus, ran to Jerusalem to find the eleven gathered there, and told them what had happened, and as they were telling the eleven gathered in Jerusalem, Jesus Himself stood among them. While they were still talking, Jesus appeared among them, and simply said, “Peace be with you.” They set a new, all-Jerusalem record for the jumping straight up and backwards into the corner! It says that they were startled and they were afraid. They were scared to death! Even Scripture says they thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus said, “It's me. Calm down. Look at my hands and feet.” The implication is see the scars. Touch me I'm not a ghost. I have flesh and bones. Look! As the translation in the RSV says, they disbelieved for joy. It seems in an effort to convince them that He was not a ghost, He said, “All right, do you have anything to eat here?” They gave Him, still frightened; I think, from a distance, a piece of broiled fish. He took it, and He ate it, and then He started to teach, just as He had taught the followers in Emmaus. He taught them that the cross was not a failure. He taught them that the Messiah had to suffer and die and rise on the third day. He taught them that His ministry was not over, in fact, it had just become focused and triumphant, and was ready to be given into their hands along with the gift of the Holy Spirit to encourage and to empower them.

The Book of Acts says that He taught them for 40 days, then blessed them, and then ascended, and then sent the Holy Spirit, which we know as the Pentecost event. Now, some people do understand that the Christian faith is a set of teachings, that it is a philosophy, but no, not a ghost of a chance!

That reminds me of a story, and when I say that reminds me of a story, what follows is supposed to be, is meant to be, is intended to be humorous. At the end, I'll pause. The story is at this time of year, a man made some forms, you know, put some boards up,

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 30, 2006

some forms for concrete. He dug a new sidewalk in his front yard, and he had waited for the warm weather to make sure that this sidewalk would dry perfectly with no cracks. He had the sidewalk poured, and he was sort of halfway keeping an eye out the window on it, and then at one point, he glanced out the window, and to his shock, there were some children out there doing what children do. They were writing their names in the still wet concrete, on his perfect sidewalk! He went berserk! He ran from his house. He screamed at the kids. He chased them down the block. He threatened lawsuits against their college funds. His wife had to come out and grab him and stop him, and say, “John, what is wrong with you? You love children!” He said, “Yes, dear, I love children in the abstract, but not in the concrete!” Okay.

Now, this odd resurrection story is meant to teach us that Jesus is no philosopher whose teaching continued on, neither was He a ghost nor a figment of the disciples’ imagination. His teaching continued beyond His death because He continued beyond His death. In Jesus, God came to us concretely in the flesh and overcame sin and death! Because God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross, we can be assured that the Creator, the judge of the universe, the law giver, knows our hearts, and is also the same One who offers complete forgiveness, undiminished love, and real available relationship even in this moment. Available relationship, for He lives!

We are those, I hope, who already believe. Now, this story gives a little more substance to our belief. Jesus is not a symbol, not a ghost, not a dream, not a memory, not an idle tale. He arose from the dead, and is alive forevermore for whomsoever will come. We may be though, like the disciples. They believed to a point, at least, they felt kindly toward Jesus. They had some trust in Jesus. They had admiration for Him, and they thought that all remained of Him in that moment was simply a memory, or when He showed up, a ghost! They did not get it, that He was still as available as ever; to relate to, to comfort, even to touch. All through this chapter of Luke, Scripture tells us another thing. Scripture tells us that the disciples did not understand Scripture. It’s interesting. Have you ever thought about that? Imagine the disciples, the early church, recording the Gospels, and writing down, having to write down in the New Testament, for all time that they did not understand Scripture, did not really understand after all that time who Jesus was, and that the powers of this world would kill Him, and that the Resurrection would happen. Mark wrote down in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, “But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask Him.” Imagine Mark having to write down, essentially, we were stupid and were afraid to ask.

Here, they are afraid for their lives, and they are confused about all that had happened. Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from on high, and that is a good thing because they had no confidence. They had no power of their own, and neither do we. At the same time in our world today, at the same time that spirituality in general is hot, it is becoming quite unfashionable to believe specific things about God. We believe that Christianity is a good idea. I mean, who can argue that loving God and loving neighbor and loving self and even loving enemies, when practiced, when practiced, who can believe that these teachings don’t make the world a better place for

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 30, 2006

all? When made flesh, when made concrete, when made real in our relationships, the whole world is better when Jesus’ teachings are practiced, but these things are not possible apart from a relationship with the living Christ. Thank God that a relationship is possible. It is possible because Jesus is available, and was not defeated by death. The disciples had heard all the teachings and they had heard all the parables, but still they had no power, no confidence, and no sense of authority until they truly got it that their rabbi, their teacher was more than a man. He told them that He would always be with them, and even in them through the Holy Spirit. We need the same thing they needed. We need to know that Jesus lives and that God is available for relationship, to give us direction, to give us power and guidance, and most importantly, what Jesus promised, comfort. Jesus called the Holy Spirit the comforter, and we need comfort.

We all come to church on Sunday. We’re dressed up, our hair is combed. We are mature. We are civil. We are polite. We are together, but from day to day and hour-to-hour in the dark nights of the soul, what I need most, most often, is God’s comfort, God present, real, as comforter. I feel sorry for Christians whose faith is wrapped up completely in proper doctrine. If your faith is wrapped up completely in doctrine alone, something is upside down. Doctrine is important, but first Jesus calmed the disciples’ fears. He proved that He was still available, that He loved them, and then He taught them on a deeper level, and then He blessed them with His continued presence through the Holy Spirit. He is with them and He is with us. He promised in that way to be with them always, to be with us always, and to trust that we will never be alone, that is the foundation of faith. First, trust is the foundation of faith. Faith is first trust, and then it is spiritual comfort, and then comes the teaching. Yes, doctrine does equal direction, and that is important, but I picture the disciples huddled in the corner until they knew that they could still trust Jesus as an available, real, present person. Doctrine did not mean much until they knew that even death could not stand in the way of God’s determination to be in relationship with His children.

You know, church history is filled with good examples of how bad doctrine can send you off in the wrong direction. That reminds me of another story, okay. Once a dashing, dedicated knight returned to the castle, and he was a mess. His armor was dented. His helmet had a gash in it. His face was bloody. His horse was limping. The lord of the castle saw him coming, and rushed out to meet him, and said, “What happened to you, sir knight?” He straightened himself up as best he could, and he said, “Sire, I have been laboring in your service, robbing and burning and pillaging your enemies to the West.” The nobleman was utterly taken aback. He said, “You’ve been what? I have no enemies to the West!” He said, “Oh, oh, you do now.”

It is important, it is important that you know what you believe before you start acting on those beliefs. I have found over the years, and I bet you have, too, that the fiercest disagreements between Christians happen when they get things out of order, and they lead first with doctrine and forget about relationship, relationship with God and with neighbor and even with enemies. Relationship built first upon trust and faith, on the real and present living God.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 30, 2006

Of course we have questions, and we have moments of fear and trembling, and the disciples had these as well, but I wonder if part of their fear was now that Jesus could show up at anytime, at any place, through any locked door! Then and now, you cannot lock Jesus out of your life. I think you can turn your back on Jesus, you can wander in a far country, and harm yourself and harm others in the process, but Jesus, in my experience, will continue to knock, continue to knock at the door of your heart. Jesus is no mere memory, no phantom, no ghost. He is real, more real than sin and death.

I remember when my daughter, Christina, was about three years old. I used to love to play monster with her. I don't know if you know what that is. That's when you get a three-year-old, and you terrorize them just a little bit. It's all in good fun. You chase them around the house. I had a construction paper mask with eye holes in it that she had made, and I was sort of chasing her with the monster mask, and I went a little bit too far. I guess Mom wasn't home. Christina got in the corner, and she was whimpering a little, and she held her arms up, and she said, "I want to see Daddy! I want to see Daddy!" I took the mask off, and I said I was sorry, and I hugged her. Well, the world was frightened, and the world was backed up in a corner whimpering, I want to see Daddy, and so the word became flesh and dwelt among us. The word in flesh is Jesus, and when we see Jesus, we see the face of God, our Father, Abba, as Jesus said, Daddy. In Jesus' face we know that our biggest fears of judgment and death can drop away. They are real, but not as real as the love God revealed in Jesus on the cross for you and me. Fear, anger, sin, and death are mere shadows in the face of the eternal reality, of the resurrected Christ.

There are times when we, like the disciples, disbelieve for joy because it is just too good to be true, but the good news is, it is true. I suppose my point is even the disciples had to grow. They had only a seed of faith, a trust that somehow God was working in Jesus, and that seed blossomed into an understanding that God was not just working in Jesus, but that God was in Jesus! As it says in John 10:30, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one."

I remember when Phillip said to Jesus in John 14, "Show us the Father," and Jesus shakes His head, and says, "Phillip, have I been with you so long, how can you say show us the Father?" Or Thomas who said, "I will not believe," but then he said, "My Lord, and my God." Just as their understanding of Jesus had to grow, so did their understanding of their mission have to grow. Their faith, it started so small. Their understanding of God's Messiah started provincially, Jerusalem-based faith, it was all about a little bitty idea of a kingdom in a little bitty city in the Middle Eastern corner of the world. What a small dream! Can you imagine how the resurrected Christ shattered and then rebuilt their vision of what God was doing? Jesus proceeded to explain that His suffering was required because this world is so fallen that real love and real innocence and real peace are hated. The norm for our world is bitterness and vengeance, debauchery and war. Read any exhaustive history or pick up any newspaper. Throughout the Old Testament, God's prophets were despised and killed. God's law, built upon the Ten Commandments, was meant for our own good, and it merely encourages us to stay in

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 30, 2006

love with God and love with our neighbor, but the history of the Bible is the history of us rejecting God and rejecting neighbor, rejecting law and rejecting limits, rejecting relationship. In Jesus Christ, God burst into our world and startled our world just as Jesus startled the disciples. He revealed both the bad news of our sin and the good news of God's determination to offer us love and life eternal. Jesus revealed God's determination to comfort us and to grow in us a faith that connects us to Him and to others. Now, it's too late for us to be in that room with the disciples, but we can meet God here, and we can meet God here. Jesus said so. Will we believe from a distance out of fear, or will we embrace the risen Christ? Jesus promised the comfort of the Holy Spirit would be in us, and give us peace and comfort that nothing in the world could, and many of us have had many of the things the world can offer, and we have found when we obtain them that they were empty. Jesus promised a peace and a comfort that is full and real and eternal. If our faith is mere doctrine, mere words, mere idle tales from long ago, then where is the relationship with the risen Christ? Without first having trust and receiving the comfort of the Spirit, we dare not descend into doctrine alone as a substitute for a relationship with the living God. There are many systems from which you can choose in this world in which to believe, but Christianity is not a system, it is a relationship with the living God. We are not better than the disciples, of course, first we must trust in Christ, then pray for the comforter and the wisdom and the power of God's Holy Spirit, and then from there, we can grow together with God and with each other, and begin to be the church and begin to understand better His Word, and then we can boast not of what we have done, but what God is doing through such bundles of dust like us. Amen.