

Acts 3:12-19

Psalm 4

1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36b-48

We all know how important physical presence can be. When we were planning my daughter's wedding, I had a conversation with a dear friend that is still vivid for me. She's two decades older than me and lives about three hours away. I told her how important it was to me for her to be at Melissa's wedding, but she said she was getting too old to make the six hour roundtrip. She assured me that she would be there with us 'in spirit.' Without thinking, I protested! I told her that being there 'in spirit' wasn't what I needed. I wanted to be able to see her face, to see her smile, to look into her eyes and to hug her when all was done. I needed her to be there in person. And bless her, heart, she showed up!

Physical presence is important. When you love somebody, you show up!

Jesus, too, knew how important physical presence is. He showed up! He showed up to the people who loved him best...the people who had been most destroyed by his death. He was the centerpiece, the central figure, for all the disciples. Losing Jesus was like losing the hub of a wheel. Everything fell apart. On the third day, they were still grappling with his gruesome death. It was unbelievable. They were in denial that it had even happened. And they were terrified for their own safety.

While the disciples grapple with this awful tragedy, the rumors begin to fly around them. Mary Magdalene reports that she has seen the Master! Peter confirms that the tomb is empty. Cleopas and his companion arrive breathlessly to the little group huddled behind the locked doors with a fantastic story of having walked all the way to Emmaus with Jesus without realizing who he was until he broke bread with them. And then he disappeared as quickly and as mysteriously as he had appeared. Cleopas and his companion are ecstatic. They couldn't get back to Jerusalem fast enough to share the news with the disciples. They ran all the way...all 20 miles! And word comes back to them that Jesus has also appeared to Simon Peter. The disciples are just confused. What's going on here? What are they to think?

Cowering behind locked doors in that little room...terrified and filled with grief...confused and desolate...the disciples are flooded with contradictory information. He died. Yes, but he's alive. How can that be? That's impossible!! And while they are discussing all these things, Jesus

simply shows up! He is suddenly in the midst of them. They don't believe their eyes. They are filled with terror and doubt even as his first words to them are "Peace be with you."

Now mind you, these disciples have not been out looking for Jesus. They've locked themselves into a room together to try to create some sense of safety for themselves. They aren't out looking for their resurrected Master. They are busy trying to re-group! And He shows up!

Jesus isn't angry with them or disappointed in them that they are incredulous and filled with doubt. Jesus simply goes about reassuring them. He asks for something to eat and then eats the broiled fish they offer him in their presence. Ghosts and apparitions don't eat. He invites them to look at the scars in his hands and feet. He's not walking several inches off the floor as ghosts were said to do. He tells them to touch him so that they can see that he has flesh and bones...neither of which apparitions or ghosts have. He understands how unbelievable this all is to them and he is not at all impatient with them.

And he gives them a very special gift. As with Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, Jesus opens their minds to understand the scriptures. He provides them with that wonderful "Aha" moment that we all cherish...that moment in studying scripture when the lightbulb turns on and we connect all the dots and we can say with confidence, "Oh, THAT'S what that means!"

And then Jesus does one other thing. He charges them to be witnesses to all these things! He tells them to spread the word about all that they have seen and heard and what they now understand. It is impossible for any of us to go out into the world with conviction to tell this story unless we have some understanding of what we have just seen and heard. Jesus showed up and gave that little desolate band of faithful followers the experience and the understanding so that they could, indeed, be unshakable witnesses to the rest of the world. He moved them into the future when he charged them to be witnesses...to all the nations! Most of them went to their deaths refusing to recant what they knew about Jesus. People don't die for a rumor or a myth. They die for something they know with their whole being...body and soul...to be the truth! The disciples often misunderstood Jesus even when he explained who he was and what was happening and why he was doing what he was doing. The experience of his death was traumatic, but when he was raised from the dead, he kept the most important promise of all. He showed up! Physical presence is powerful.

We can go through all the scriptures and find the proof text that we are looking for in both the Old Testament prophecies and the New Testament proclamations, but for each of us, there is no better teacher than to experience the presence of Christ ourselves. We are mere mortals.

Jesus knows that. He is very patient and reassuring. And Jesus knows that it is necessary for us as mere mortals not just to know the story, but to experience the person of Jesus Christ for ourselves. And even when we are not out looking for him, Jesus can and will show up for us.

So often we are told that we need to seek out Jesus...we need to pray harder or better...we need to behave better and sin less...we need to learn the scripture from one end to the other...we need to be good examples to others...we need to come to worship prepared for the experience. But maybe that's not the way it is. Maybe we, too, are locked behind closed doors. Maybe we are locked up behind anxiety about our own situation...our job or our health or our future. Maybe we are locked up in our own fear...fear of what will happen in our community or in our country or in the world. Maybe we are locked up behind our own doubts about the creed, or about Jesus, or even about the reality of God. Maybe we are frozen in frustration about our inability to figure it all out. But Jesus shows up behind all those locked doors whether we are looking for him or not. Jesus is an experience for each of us. Perhaps it happens in the snippet of a favorite hymn, or a smile from someone who rarely smiles, or a kind word that we desperately need from someone who actually knows little to nothing about our situation. Jesus shows up even now in all sorts of ways...and often when we least expect it...at those moments in our lives when we are filled with doubt and struggle and need Him most.

Jesus told his followers that he would suffer. He did.

He promised his followers that he would be raised on the third day. He was.

He has promised us that whenever two or three are gathered together in his name he will be among them. He is.

And we bear witness to the fact that he is known to us in the breaking of the bread.

These are Jesus' promises...and we know that Jesus keeps his word!

Jesus does show up!

Thanks be to God.            AMEN.