

Luke 24: 36b-48 “God-Spirited People” Rev. Janet Chapman 4/14/24

One of my favorite activities to do with the junior age youth groups I worked with, especially around Halloween, was to play “What’s in the box?” I would cut a hand-sized hole in a box and place a mystery object inside. You could reach inside the box, smell the box, shake the box – everything but open the box. Each kid would get a turn with the box and share what they discovered with the rest of the group. Before slime became a thing you could buy at Target, I would make my own and place it in a chilled Ziploc bag and then carefully secure it inside the box. It never failed to freak some kids out when they slipped their hands in the box. I promised them what was inside would not harm them but it might surprise them. Sometimes I’d glue 4 or 5 brillo SOS pads together, you know those bristly grey scrubbing pads used to clean metal frying pans? Or sometimes it was a long rubber snake greased with Crisco oil. Reactions came like “Ewww it’s slimy,” or “It was poky and itchy.” Kids were convinced it was just a game but there was a lesson behind the exercise. They were learning how to explore their world, how to ask the right questions, put together the evidence, hold back wild guesses, be patient and wait for the right conclusions to emerge. All of these are good skills in reading the Bible and Jesus used a similar teaching approach as he leads his disciples into exploring the post-Easter world.

We are in a post-Easter world still today. In the church calendar, the season of Easter lasts for 50 days. Most of our society thinks Easter is over when we’ve managed to vacuum up the last of that annoying plastic Easter grass off the carpets and the children have finally come down from their sugar highs. But long afterwards, the church is still honoring Easter. Nadia Bolz Weber points out

that for a holiday that is supposed to be about new life, resurrection, God's glory, and for some reason bunnies, we rarely get any of that in the biblical stories that we call the resurrection accounts. What we do get, when we read stories of Jesus appearing to his disciples after resurrection, are a great deal of fear and doubt mixed with wounds and food. There aren't a whole lot of conclusions or answers, but for some reason, there seems to be a lot of broiled fish.

Our reading today finds the disciples gathered together 3 days after Jesus died. All they know for sure was that their teacher and Lord was dead. In the face of such loss, they were understandably scared and filled with doubts. Suddenly a man who looks just like Jesus stands among them, even though no one opened any locked doors. Two possibilities surface – first Jesus never really died, it was someone else, and he has been hiding in this room the whole time. But they were there – they saw the cross, the body, the sealed tomb. So they surmise this must be a ghost, and ghosts are not usually signs of good news. But Jesus gently coaxes them toward a third inconceivable insight. He doesn't explain resurrection, but instead encourages them to discover it for themselves. He offers himself saying, "Look at my hands and feet, where I was nailed to the wood. Yes, that's right. I did die. A ghost? Are you sure? Touch me, is that what a ghost feels like? I am here – don't be afraid. Let's eat some broiled fish." Not really what you would expect from the Risen Lord, huh? The Lectionary Comic posts some humorous thoughts on the text by having 2 sheep discuss the story. One asks the other, "So let me get this straight – Jesus just shows up out of the blue and asks for something to eat?" The other responds, "Yeah, it's great... he's no ghost, it's really him, body and all." The first sheep pauses then

says, "Still, you'd think he would call first!" Social etiquette aside, Jesus doesn't judge or rebuke his disciples, he simply tries to teach them. Eating broiled fish was just one more bit of evidence since as far as we know, apparitions don't chew and swallow. Jesus is keeping it real for his friends up close and personal. The truth is that Jesus' teachings, his actions, have scared his disciples for years now because he makes clear that you can't know him from a distance, on your own private terms. You can't think your way into knowing Jesus by answers you may find in your own private Bible study. You can't know him by spiritualizing him, making him into some magical otherworldly symbol. This guy is the real deal asking crucial, human questions like, "So do you have something to eat?" Bolz Weber wonders if maybe this text is trying to tell us that if we try and get all religious or spiritual, if we try to imagine ourselves floating above all the mess of our broken and very physical world, then we might just miss Jesus altogether. Because that's Jesus over at the snack table, standing in the Gaza food line, dozing in the ICU waiting room, weeping at the bombing death of a Ukrainian family, hanging out with the school geeks, sleeping under the Cypress bridge, trudging across the Rio Grand fleeing the Nicaragua cartel, marching in the Pride parade, raising his voice on behalf of those who have no voice. Some may say those are some embarrassing places for Jesus to be hanging out, but despite all our attempts to spiritualize, cleanse and middle-class up Jesus, he just stands there eating broiled fish with bare hands, holes and all.

With wounds quite visible, raw, and gaping, he stands in their midst, on their level and makes clear he is still a part of the gang called humanity. This story is so fleshy in detail that it is hard to ignore the human characteristics. This is not a Risen Lord that is unreachable, untouchable and we get the idea that

God wants us to understand that even now. Being human is not a bad thing, we are not innately evil no matter how many times people try to prove otherwise. If the Risen Lord still carries visible wounds, still asks to be fed, still breathes in air and exhales it, all very human aspects, then how can being human be a bad thing? On top of that, how can carrying visible wounds be a bad thing? It is by the very human aspect of breathing on the disciples that the Risen Lord passes on the Holy Spirit to them and they become God-Spirited people. There is no supernatural act here, just breath being expelled which equips, empowers, and encourages. Then, the Risen Christ explains to these God-Spirited people what God has intended for creation from the very beginning. From the covenant with Abraham to the exodus from Egypt, from Ezekiel's valley of dry bones to Isaiah's suffering servant, each story handed down is another key to unlocking the doors of their minds, of our minds, to the truth. Each story reveals new insights and evidence about God's realm as it is intended so that we don't have to rely on wild guesses, but can learn to be patient and wait for the right conclusions to emerge. God has always desired to be with humanity, no matter how broken, no matter how wounded we are. This is the overarching story to which those disciples and subsequently you and I are called to be witnesses. Cynthia Audet grew up with a scar on her face. At the age of 3, she sustained an injury that left a perfect arrow on her cheek, pointing to her left eye. She recalls that she was too young at the time to understand that facial scars were considered a bad thing. Growing up, she didn't mind the scar. In fact, she came to understand it as something that brought her attention, tenderness, and candy. As she grew older, she began to take pride in her scar, part to stop bullies from taunting her about it. The more the bullies called her "Scarface," the more she resisted and

found herself like it. When she turned 15, her parents, on the advice of a plastic surgeon, decided it was time to operate on what was by then a thick, shiny red scar. She protested. She believed it made her unique and pretty in her own special way. But her parents prevailed. “It’s a deformity,” they said. So the doctors operated, sanded down the arrow, and after a few surgeries, her cheek was smooth. She is now in her 20’s and says when she looks in the mirror, there is a certain sadness that the scar is no longer there. She remembers there was something powerful about the scar and the defiant, proud person she became because of it. Cynthia concluded, “I have never been quite so strong since they cut it out.” In a culture of perfection where we’re told appearance matters, this story may seem odd. But Cynthia had come to understand what the Risen Lord revealed to his disciples. Our wounds and scars, signs of our suffering in this world, are the things that point to the truth of resurrection, our resurrection. We are therefore witnesses to this truth. The Risen Lord doesn’t explain resurrection, but instead encourages us to explore it for ourselves. In this very human life of ours, suffering and hardship will happen not because we are bad but because life is hard; we die little deaths again and again. But – and this is what the Risen Christ was teaching his disciples that day – God takes our suffering and makes it work for good in the world to fulfill God’s purposes and use it as a means of redemption. Therefore, the scars we bear in our hearts and on our bodies can become sources of strength, evidence of God’s power in the world, proof that the absolute worst things can happen to us, and God still will be faithful to raise you up out of it, in order to bring joy to a disbelieving world. The Risen Lord says, “Look at my scars. Feel my wounds. You are witnesses to these things. Find here your resurrection.” Amen.