

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 18, 2021**

**“In Their Joy They Were Disbelieving”
Luke 24:36-49**

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“While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering...” (v. 41).

Our Gospel Lesson this week picks up just where the story left off last Sunday. Jesus had come alongside two disciples on their long walk to Emmaus, and—after recognizing him—they hastily set off on that late-night dash back to Jerusalem. As the disciples arrived, and met with fellow followers of Jesus, they shared with each other new reports of the Risen Christ, and—at that moment—our Lesson begins: “While they were talking about this,” Luke tells us, “Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’” (v. 36).

Since they’re in the midst of sharing, excitedly, this news of resurrection, one might expect a joyful response to the Risen Christ appearing—but, as we often see in the stories of Easter, the disciples instead react with fear: “They were startled and terrified,” Luke writes, “and thought that they were seeing a ghost” (v. 37). Notice the reason for their terror: they feared they were “seeing a ghost.” As one commentator puts it, “the disciples thought they were encountering the dead, not the living” (Craddock). They had witnessed the death of Jesus, and now—still unable to comprehend resurrection and risen life—they misinterpret what’s happening, perceiving Jesus, rather frightfully, as a “bodiless ghost” (Ignatius).

And in this way, the disciples end up reducing God to the limits of their preconceptions, the limits of their own understanding—something we often do ourselves—and that’s what prevents them from grasping what’s right before them. When—intentionally or not—we reduce God to our limited understanding, God can seem very small indeed. I’m reminded of a day, when I lived in Montreal, standing at the lookout atop what we called “The Mountain,” Mont Royal at the centre of the city. A young girl, maybe five years old, visiting from France, ran up to the lookout with her father—and, taking in this impressive view of the City of Montreal, she exclaimed: “Le Canada, c’est énorme!” (“Canada: it’s enormous!”) And then, pointing toward the South Shore, she asked, “Et là-bas, c’est la France?” (“And over there, that’s France?”) Her father, pausing thoughtfully a moment, answered: “C’est un peu plus loin” (“It’s a little bit further”). The disciples, face-to-face with the extraordinary reality of resurrection, shrink the scale and scope of what’s happened to something as dull as a ghost sighting, reducing the Risen Lord to Jesus the Friendly Ghost.

And since we often do the same, and would likewise reduce God Almighty to the narrow categories of our own understanding, we should attend carefully to how the Risen Christ responds. Luke writes: “He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 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.’ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet” (vv. 38-39). Notice, Jesus does not abandon them to their doubts or their mistaken perception of resurrection—and neither does he condemn them for their errors. Instead, the Risen Christ meets the disciples in their doubts. He invites them to discover him and encounter him in his Risen life, as the Lord who is

familiar to them and yet changed, whose “new body was [...] the transformation of the old one” (Wright). Notice the patience, as he offers his own body as a sign of what has happened in Easter, and as he explains—patiently and persistently—that this is not the dead but the living, not a ghost but the Lord.

And does it work? Well, not quite. At first, encountering the Risen Christ, “[t]hey were startled and terrified” (v. 37). Now—after Jesus has spoken patiently with them, showing them that he’s not dead but alive—they’re no longer terrified, but they’re still not quite believing: *they’re somewhere in between*. Luke writes: “in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering” (v. 41). Isn’t that a wonderful phrase? Luke describes their uncertainty and doubt, their expectant joy and confusion, all fused together in their experience of the presence of the Risen Christ. This is no simple black-and-white binary of faith or doubt, but faith taking shape amid doubt, faith rising amid receding doubt... Perhaps, for the disciples, still reeling and crushed by the death of Jesus—perhaps, for them, this encounter with the Risen Christ is almost too much to hope for...and so they can’t yet quite believe it. For those who’ve seen Jesus die on the cross, and now see him alive, there’s perhaps a moment of hesitation amid their joy: “It’s true! But can it be true?”

Again, the disciples seem much like many of us, with that mixture of faith and doubt, joy and disbelief. I’m reminded of that story, in the Gospel of Mark, where the man “crie[s] out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (9:24). And again, we should attend to how Jesus responds to the disciples: he met them, and they were frightened; he spoke patiently with them, and they persist in “disbelieving.” So what will Jesus do next? Luke writes: “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence” (vv. 41-43). He’d spoken with them, but that didn’t suffice to bring them to faith...so now Jesus enacts a most human, and living, gesture: he eats “a piece of broiled fish,” and—in this tangible, tactile way—Jesus “emphasizes again the reality of the resurrection” (Tiede).

We should be sympathetic to the disciples in their fear and confusion, since we can relate to their uncertainties; though, at the same time, we might note that Jesus had been preparing them for resurrection for quite some time—and they maybe should’ve known better, by this point, than to think that he was a ghost. And yet, remarkably, there seems to be no trace of judgment from Jesus, who patiently explains what has happened, shows them his own body, and even demonstrates his alive-ness by eating. This is extraordinary: God in Christ patiently persists until they recognize what has happened.

In the Reformed tradition, the expression of the Christian tradition in which the Presbyterian Church took shape, we pay particular attention to how God—who is almighty, beyond all understanding—how God nonetheless accommodates Godself to our limitations, to our weaknesses, in order to become understandable to us. And we see God’s accommodation to us—God coming all the way down to a level we can understand—in the incarnation, as God was born among us as one of us. One Reformer put it like this: “In Christ God so to speak makes himself little, in order to lower himself to our capacity” (Calvin). And, in this Easter appearance, we see a clear example of God’s accommodation to us, as God in Christ patiently leads the disciples to trust in him and in his Risen life.

And I think, as the Risen Lord meets the disciples in their doubts, we may find some encouragement for ourselves. Doubt is not an unusual facet of the life of faith. *Living Faith*, a guiding document for the Presbyterian Church in Canada, even includes a section entitled “Doubt,” which we explored in the

Lenten Series. Listen to a few selections from that section: “We are not always certain that God is with us. At times God calls us to live in this world without experiencing the divine presence [...]. Through such struggle we mature in faith. [...] Questioning may be a sign of growth. [...] Since we are to love God with our minds, as well as our hearts, the working through of doubt is part of our growth in faith. The church includes many who struggle with doubt. [...] Though the strength of our faith may vary and in many ways be assailed and weakened, yet we may find assurance in Christ [...].”

Sometimes people think they’re doubting God when really they’re only inquiring about God and the Christian faith—and I strongly encourage exploring the faith by asking hard questions, by challenging and re-envisioning our shared understanding of the faith through questions that enable us better to grasp our faith and our place in the world. It occurs to me that—in our Gospel Lesson—if the disciples hadn’t questioned the Risen Christ, they might’ve been left with the boring conclusion that Jesus was a ghost; however, because they inquired—because, in that wonderful phrase, “in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering”—they grew in faith, discovering—in dialogue with Jesus—what God had accomplished in the resurrection.

In our doubting and in our questioning, we may take comfort in knowing that God, in God’s kindness, accommodates Godself to our weakness, comes near to us in our doubting as in our believing, and—by the power of the Spirit—makes the Risen Christ known to us. We live always before God, in God’s presence, and—as I tried to explore in the Word to the Children—doubt has its place in dialogue with God, in prayer, and even in praise. Just as the disciples doubted the resurrection when face-to-face with the Risen Christ, we may offer our own doubts before God—like the psalmist, who asks God, “How long will you hide your face from me?” (13:1).

In our next hymn, we hear this sort of prayer, addressing to God the need for God’s own help amid our doubts about God: “Teach me to feel that thou art always nigh; teach me the struggles of the soul to bear, *to face the rising doubt*, the rebel sigh; teach me the patience of unanswered prayer” (Croly). And, as we bring our doubts before God, we may look with trust to the presence of the Risen Christ, the one who came alongside the disciples, accommodating himself to their limitations, meeting them in their doubts. As we’ll sing in our final hymn this morning: “I fear in the dark *and the doubt* of my journey; but courage will come by the sound of your steps by my side.” May this be our song, as well, when—“in [our] joy”—we too are “disbelieving and still wondering.” Amen.