

Homily - St. Andrew's
April 19, 2015, Easter 3B
Luke 24:36b-48

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Easter is the strangest of the church seasons. Like Christmas, it revolves around a miracle but the miracle of a new baby is clear and obvious. There might be some mystery around how the baby Jesus was conceived but the baby himself is something we can understand because he's someone we can hold and cuddle and love. Easter, on the other hand, is much different. The miracle of Easter is much less comprehensible and much more mysterious because the miracle of Easter begins with an empty tomb. The birth of a baby is hard to deny... the crying kind of gives it away... but a strange, fantastical story of resurrection, of new life, as the explanation for an empty tomb is completely deniable and disbelieve-able. And yet it is the core of our faith. It is no wonder the Easter season lasts 50 days, because we need at least that long to even begin to work out what has happened and what it might mean for our lives.

The Gospel story we hear today follows a familiar pattern from several other stories of resurrection. The original ending of the Gospel according to Mark has the women fleeing from the empty tomb in terror and amazement to say nothing to anyone out of fear. According to the Gospel of John, the evening of that first Easter has the disciples gathered together in Jerusalem with the doors locked out of fear, when the Jesus appears among them to offer peace. But the one who was missing that night, Thomas, doesn't believe the strange story of his friends, holding out instead for his own experience of the Risen Christ. Perfectly reasonable Thomas is doubtful and the other disciples are fearful. Fear and doubt - these are the common first responses to the distressing and surprising series of recent events.

Today we hear the story of the final appearance of the Risen Jesus to the disciples in the Gospel according to Luke. It happens late on the day of resurrection, after 2 disciples have made their way to Emmaus and back to tell the others of their experience. Little did they know that Jesus too had made the return trip and interrupts the reunion with the common greeting: "Peace be with you." Even having been prepared with the 2 disciples' story of Jesus on the road and a report that "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon..." still the first response of the gathered disciples is surprise and terror, for they think they're seeing ghost. It is a reasonable response. They had all just been through the trauma of watching Jesus being betrayed and railroaded, crucified and buried. And now, in the midst of their grief and their fear about what might happen next - what might happen to them, given what happened to Jesus - now another curve ball is tossed their direction. Fear and doubt seem like pretty reasonable responses.

For a number of years now, I've often struggled with the shock of Easter and I've often been aware that while the miracle of resurrection comes in an instant, the reality of what it means is a process of discovery of God's new call and God's new life in our lives. I've often found myself feeling more like Mary weeping outside the tomb than like Peter who runs straight into it, believes, and heads home, seemingly at peace. I've found that it takes time for the reality of new and transformed life to break through the residual grief of the difficult week that came before.

Such is the case this year more obviously than others and so I find myself grateful for stories of shock and tempered hope from faithful disciples who mostly find themselves fearful and doubtful.

For many of us, maybe for all of us here today... our understanding of Jesus' resurrection comes from direct and personal experience of the Risen Christ in our lives... whether it be simply from a faithful life of participation in a worshipping community, or from the experience of gracious, undeserved love of that community, the Body of Christ, or from a personal experience through a vision or some other mystical knowledge. As those who have already come to believe the fantastical, unbelievable story of new hope and new life... the fear and doubt of our Gospel today is something we must remember. For a majority of people in the world today... at least a majority of people in our direct community of Calgary and Canada... the story of Christ's resurrection is but fantasy. If they've never known the gracious, undeserved love of the community of Christ, if they've never had a direct experience of God or heard the stories that might help explain the devastation, the hope, the pain and the beauty of life... our testimony too might seem like an idle tale. And so we would do well to be gentle when we hear a response of fear or doubt to our message of joy and fullness of life. I've had a reminder this year of just how hard it can be to believe and I'm glad to be in the good company of Jesus' first disciples and so many since, who find a way from doubt to belief and from fear to fullness of life.

It is this journey - the resurrection journey of how to get from fear and doubt to worship, that forms the backdrop of our Gospel story today. First, Jesus presents proof that it is indeed him: "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." Like John's story of Thomas, the physicality of the resurrected Christ is emphasized. Though grief is now replaced with joy, even this was not enough: "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.'" Luke takes pains to point to Jesus' physical body as proof that resurrection isn't just about spirit. Jesus isn't a ghost but something real and this-worldly has occurred.

This part has been particularly difficult for many through the empirical, scientific age that we have been through in the past 200-odd years. The main difficulty is that we will never have enough empirical evidence that the testimony is true to break through 21st century standards of scientific accuracy. And so we must find other ways, other avenues of 'proof,' if anyone is to be convinced that our tale of resurrection is real. The good news is that the demands of empirical evidence have changed a great deal in recent years. The folk wisdom to "believe nothing that you hear and only half of what you see" is now overly optimistic. With technology that children and teens can use, we know that photos and videos can too easily be faked and so the ground for belief has shifted such that "proof" means something different. And so our task is to search for ways of speaking about our belief and our practice that make sense for 21st century ears. The power of ancient story, the truth of our personal experience and the authenticity with which we live within and because of those things can hold great authority today - more, perhaps, than objective fact.

The second part of today's appearance story looks both backwards and forwards from this miraculous moment. It looks backwards as Jesus reminds the disciples about what he said before all hell broke loose: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you - that

everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” And then Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures...” Jesus gathers all that has happened together, reminding them of his work of healing and preaching, while also separating himself by acknowledging that things are no longer the same. Jesus is no longer with the disciples as he once was but the work of the kingdom of God about which Jesus preached so often, must now continue through the disciples. Among the key components of this work is remembering Jesus’ words from days gone by and learning to interpret the scriptures anew, in light of all that has happened. That is the work that the Gospel writers undertook as they sought to tell their stories of Jesus. That is the work that Paul embraced as he traveled throughout the Roman world to gather communities of Christ-followers together in worship and prayer. That is the work that theologians and biblical scholars have embraced over the centuries, as they have sought to bring the best of current knowledge to their experience of faith. And that is the work to which the faithful continue to be called... to interpret ancient stories in light of all that has happened and to seek understanding in this age.

The transitional space that the season of Easter embodies is the journey from looking to Jesus as the main actor in the story to recognizing Jesus’ call to continue his work. “You are witnesses of these things,” Jesus says, and it won’t be too long until the Risen Jesus finally ascends to heaven and it will be fully up to us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to be the Body of Christ here on earth. Such a huge transition takes time... it’s why we celebrate Easter for 50 days. It takes time for fear to turn to joy and for doubt to give way to belief. It takes time for the mantle of living the Way of God to pass from God’s own Son, Jesus, to the community who gather in Christ’s name.

May we take the time that we need to develop anew our belief in Christ’s resurrection. May we take the time that we need to refresh our interpretation of the ancient scriptures and may we take the time that we need to embrace Jesus’ call to witness to these things, that all the world may know God’s glory.