

April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Luke 24:36-48 “Outrageous Love”

Last week, we were in the book of John trying our best to redeem poor “Doubting Thomas” by addressing all the shame and blame that has been placed on him and anyone else who dares to doubt. We concluded that doubt isn’t a *hindrance* to faith, but perhaps an avenue by which to *increase* our faith. Our problem isn’t doubt. Our problem is the irrational pursuit of certainty that turns us into immovable stones. But we are Easter people, and we know what happens to stones on Easter. They are rolled away to reveal something miraculous and transformative

This week, we’re looking at Luke’s take on one of the post-resurrection encounters that Jesus had with his disciples. I’ve got to say that Luke’s post-resurrection stories are a little odd, but there aren’t really many surprises here. They’re pretty consistent with what we read in the other gospels. In Luke, when the risen Jesus appears to his closest friends and companions, they’re not entirely convinced that it’s *really* him. This probably sounds strange considering that Jesus was at the center of their lives for three years during his public ministry. If anyone is going to recognize Jesus, it’s going to be his closest friends and companions, right? Just like in John’s gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples and says, “Peace be with you.” At first they thought he was a ghost and were terrified. Jesus told them, “No, I’m not a ghost! It’s me!” And he invited them to touch the wounds in his hands and feet in the same way he allowed Thomas in John’s gospel. But then Jesus, out of the blue says, “I’m kind of hungry. Y’all got something to eat?” That probably put the disciples at ease because ghosts can’t eat, right? So they round up some broiled fish and sit down with him to eat. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus’ biggest critics are always calling him a “glutton and a drunkard” because he sees the value of connecting to people at the table. Luke’s post-resurrection stories ... this one and the encounter on the road to Emmaus in the previous chapters ... have always intrigued me, and not just because they’re “miracle stories.” I like them because they focus

on the importance of letting go of who you are in order to become a new person who is like the risen Christ.

According to Luke's gospel, Jesus was not always "himself." I'm not saying that he was somehow unrecognizable as himself, I'm just saying he wasn't always "himself." His name was Jesus, son of Mary and the carpenter Joseph. He had siblings. He grew up in a little backwoods territory in Judea called Nazareth. He learned a trade from his father and used it to help support his family. Everyone who knew him for any length of time could have identified Jesus even if they hadn't seen him for a good while. You know how you go to a high school reunion and even though you haven't seen someone for years ... maybe decades ... you still recognize them. Even when we're older, grayer, balder or thicker than the last time our classmates saw us, we have a way of recognizing each other. About nine years ago, I found out that one of my old high school classmates was living in Mary's hometown in The Dalles. I hadn't seen him since graduation night in June, 1984. We picked a time and place to meet, but we recognized each other right off the bat. I was surprised that he recognized me because I had a lot of hair when I was in high school, and I was considerably less ... fluffy. He said, "I knew it was you by the way you walk and your smile." So we have ways of recognizing each other besides the way we look on the outside, right?

Even though Jesus grew up in Nazareth and learned a trade, most Bible scholars believe that Jesus spent a period of time apart from his family studying and learning scripture. Some say he may have even been a part of the Essene community where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Eventually, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river. A lot of people in those days thought John was the messiah that they'd been looking for, but John said, "No, the one you're looking for is right here. In fact, if anything, Jesus should be baptizing me!" At his baptism, Jesus received the Holy Spirit and after 40 days alone in the wilderness, he started his public ministry. This whole time, Jesus was recognizably Jesus. But ... he hadn't really become himself. What do I mean when I

say, “He hadn’t really become himself?” Good question. And I think that’s what these post-resurrection stories in Luke are all about.

Even at the point of his death on the cross, Jesus was not yet what God had promised he would be. He was not yet the risen one, who could shake off the power of sin, evil and death. He was not yet the new kind of human being that the disciples encountered in our story ... one who was a flesh and blood person, but who, nevertheless, could appear and disappear as though he were no longer subject to the limitations of time and space. That means that for much of Luke’s gospel Jesus was *not* yet himself in the way God destined him to be.

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus is only able to truly become himself by letting go of a *lot*. His mother, being a Jewish mother and all, probably hoped that he’d become a successful merchant or, even better, maybe a lawyer or a rabbi. For Jesus to become who he had to become, both mom and son had to let go of those expectations. His friends and companions hoped that Jesus would become a political leader, a leader who could oust the Romans by force and restore the fortunes and power of Israel. But they, and he, had to let go of that plan. And from the story of the garden of Gethsemane, we can assume that Jesus himself would really have preferred to live rather than die. Or maybe retire quietly back in Nazareth rather than suffering the wrath of Rome and the Jewish High Council. But in the end, he makes a crucial decision that makes all the difference in the world. He said to God, whom he called Father, “Not my will, but yours be done.” And in that decision, he lets go of his own hopes and dreams in favor of his Father’s hopes and dreams, which ultimately enables God to complete the process of his becoming. By his death, Jesus becomes the Christ, the one anointed by God to bring a new kind of life into the world, a life so new that most of us still have trouble coming to terms with what it all means.

But that’s how it is for *any* of us! We’ll never be truly ourselves until we are able to let go of ourselves. And that may mean letting go of the usual hopes and dreams planted in us by family, friends, and culture and

making room for the self that God wills and promises for us. For the heck of it, let's call this our "Christ-self." As followers of Jesus, we say that our goal is to be more like Jesus. And that's fine. If we work towards becoming more like the pre-resurrected Jesus, that is a worthy goal ... for sure. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, stand up for the poor, heal the sick, walk in peace, love your neighbor ... all those things are important. But we are part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which means we're working towards a *higher* goal. Here's where I need to make a confession. I have a hard time identifying as a Christian sometimes. "You know Jesse, that's a heckuva thing for a preacher to be saying out loud in church on a Sunday morning." I know. Let me be clear in saying that I have no problem identifying myself as a follower of Jesus and that I love Jesus. I definitely want to model my life after Jesus even though he made it clear that following him wouldn't be easy and would put me at odds with the powers in charge of the kingdoms of the earth. But to be called a "Christian?" I have a hard time with that. It seems like every time I say I'm a Christian, people start making false assumptions about what I think, how I believe, how I vote, what music I listen to, what clothes I wear, and what channel I go to for the evening news. I don't like people making assumptions about me. I find it ... distasteful. There's a bunch of us young, rebel clergy in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who think we're all hip and everything because we'd rather call ourselves "Followers of Jesus" instead of "Christians." We think it's our way of setting ourselves apart from those "other" Christians who we think are so judgmental and holier-than-thou. But thank God our wise and prophetic Regional Minister Toni Bynum has no problem calling us out on our bully-pucky. Every time we get all "We follow Jesus," she reminds us that we are called the *Christian* Church (Disciples of *Christ*), and that we are committed to becoming like Christ. She reminds us that 1 John 3:2 says, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." We are no longer talking about Jesus of Nazareth, we are now talking about Jesus the risen Christ. (Sigh). Fine. That means to become who we are, we must choose the path of Christ.

“Ego eimi autos.” “I am myself.” That’s what the risen Christ said to his disciples in today’s gospel reading. All throughout this Easter season, I’ve encouraged you to acknowledge that we are Easter people ... that we are a people of the Resurrection. The thing is, if we affirm the resurrection, if we believe that the resurrected Jesus is somehow the one God meant Jesus to be ... the authentic Jesus ... the one who Peter confessed as “The Christ, the son of the Living God ...” the one who never quite was, but now is. How are we going to live into that?

The resurrection is not a one-off historical event that happened 2,000 years ago. It’s an inaugural, culminating occurrence that passes beyond the event itself. The resurrection of Christ isn’t just about a “bodily resurrection.” It’s a spiritual resurrection in us that is able to bear that witness ... that testimony ... inward and outward in word and action. We can’t just say, “Oh, that was a great thing that happened back then!” If it was just an historical event, and not a transformative re-occurrence that can live on and continue within us, then we’ve missed the point of the resurrection. For a lot of Christians, the point of it all is, “Well, I *believe* in the resurrection and so I’m all good.” Check! I get my heavenly reward now. Let’s sing “Our God is an Awesome God” and go out for lunch after church. But faith is a lot more than mere belief. Faith is a lot more than just saying, “Yes, I believe that this happened.” Faith means, “I’m going to live into it. I’m going to let it transform me every day as I grow into the image of what God intended me to become.” That is the difference between believing in Jesus and having faith in the Risen Christ. Christ is risen.