

We continue the season of Easter, and today, we've jumped over to the Gospel according to Luke. In case anyone asks, Luke is my favorite Gospel. Our text is from the final chapter. It's surprising to me, actually, how little attention is given to today's text. As you may recall, the chapter begins with the women going to Jesus' tomb and finding the stone had been rolled away. His body was no longer in the tomb, only two men in dazzling clothes, asking them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?"

That's how this final chapter of Luke begins. A few verses later we read the familiar story, "the road to Emmaus." Two disciples were walking on the road; the risen Jesus approached them, but as Scripture records, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." It wasn't until later that evening, as they sat together at table, when Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, that they recognized him.

The chapter ends with the very brief description of Jesus' ascension into heaven. "Lifting up his hands, he blessed them. He withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven."

So, sandwiched in between the road to Emmaus and Jesus' ascension, is today's text. After Christ's revelation to a few, they hightailed it back to Jerusalem to tell the rest that Jesus was alive. As they were swapping stories, suddenly, there was Jesus standing in their midst. "Peace be with you," he said. This is quite the Jesus thing to say; the disciples would have recognized this greeting as normal. Jesus, after all, had said this before. Offering peace to his disciples was characteristic of his ministry. It's why we pass the peace in our worship services – because Jesus did! As an aside, the regathering task group is meeting to help session figure out how we will safely worship once we're back together. We talked about the passing of the peace. Will we omit it for awhile? We'll be physically distant from one another; we won't be able to shake hands or hug. Collectively, we all agreed: of course, we will continue to pass the peace to each other, to acknowledge one another, to share with one another in the name of the one who extended his life to the point of death to make peace with humanity. We'll extend Christ's peace with a nod or a bow, or, perhaps, a wave. Passing the peace is meant to challenge us to be more than just polite to those sitting around us. It's meant to challenge us to be open, receptive, reconciling, and forgiving. It dares us to move outside of ourselves, and to come together as a Christ-like community. Our own denomination's *Book of Common Worship* ends its very brief description of "passing the peace" with these words: "It expresses an openness to the power of God's love to heal our brokenness and make us agents of that love in the world." Agents of that love in the world.

Even though the two men in dazzling clothes reminded Jesus' followers of his death and resurrection, and even though the two men on the road to Emmaus would tell their sighting of Jesus to anyone who would listen, when Jesus appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you," they were not prepared. They were startled and terrified. They were filled with fear, and thought they had seen a ghost. Under these circumstances, I'm thinking fear was a pretty human response. Jesus met them where they were, and then encouraged them to move beyond where they are, by calmly showing them his scarred hands and feet. Would you be able to touch a ghost? And like he had done on so many other occasions in Luke, Jesus asked if they had something to eat. It was the same old Jesus – but not really. He seemed to behave normally, as if nothing had happened. "Yet the appearance of Jesus after his cry of abandonment, the giving up of his spirit, and being laid in a tomb is anything but normal, natural, or expected." [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, p. 427]

This passage from Luke has a twofold agenda. So far I've only looked at the first one, that is, - to enlighten the disciples about Christ. He did that by greeting them with peace and with calm, and by appealing to the disciples senses for them to believe. Jesus invited them to look at him, more than once; he invited them to touch him, proof he wasn't a ghost; and he invited them to give him fish to eat. It is only after fear and confusion have been assuaged, that Jesus begins to teach them. Minds are not ready to listen, if they're trapped by fear. We know that. I remember the day at seminary when my mom called to tell me that my dad had pancreatic cancer. I heard nothing after the word, cancer. That day and that drive home, 35 years ago, is still the same blur. For many families today the pandemic has led to additional stress and fear, fear of the disease, fear of the loss of a job or home, or fear of being alone. Fear can stop us dead in our tracks; it can prevent us from moving forward.

For Luke the second part of his twofold agenda for this passage was to commission the disciples to proclaim the resurrection, and repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the nations. They are to be Christ's witnesses after he ascends into heaven. Though their fear may have changed to joy, the disciples were still "disbelieving and wondering." Jesus began to teach, using familiar passages of Scripture, stating prophecy – that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day. At first, Jesus' appearance to the disciples brought fear and confusion, but, I like to think that his calm voice, his message of peace, his appeal to their senses of sight, touch, hearing, even taste, sort of, with the sharing of broiled fish, and now the reminder of familiar passages of Scripture, all helped to release their fear, and prepared them to be witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God was relying on this band of followers to proclaim the hope found in the resurrection.

How, then, are we to be released from our fears in order to be proper witnesses? As someone who knows what it's like to lead with fear, I know how complicated these issues can be, whether the fears are short-term or deeply seeded. I sure don't have an easy fix, but Jesus presents for us a place to begin, with calm, messages of peace, using our senses, even our common sense, about fear, and finding comfort in the Scriptures.

Perhaps you recall Benjamin Weir, the Presbyterian minister who was held captive for years in Iran. When he was finally released from captivity, he was asked how he survived such an unimaginable ordeal. He said because he could recall many passages from Scripture, particularly, the Psalms, many of which he had memorized in his lifetime. This brought him strength and comfort, even hope, in times of utter despair and isolation.

We are called to be witnesses, agents for Jesus Christ, a call that has been passed down from generation to generation. What began as a band of disciples and other followers, is now in our hands, with God's help.

Soon, we will regather as the church in this sanctuary; we will stand and pass the peace to one another. May it express our openness to the power of God's love to heal our fears, and to make us agents of that love in the world. Amen.