

April 23, 2017

TEXT: Luke 24:36–49

TITLE: A Surprising Presence

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Easter morning 2017 began with a big service of worship—organ toccatas, trumpet fanfares, bright lights and shouted “Alleluias.” It was likely followed by family gatherings, big meals, and naps. It moved from loud to soft, from lots of activity to a time of quiet. Easter morning 33 A.D. progressed in precisely the opposite direction. It began with a hushed stillness—women carrying jars of spices down cemetery pathways in the early morning light, only to discover the void of an empty tomb. By most accounts there was some sort of conversation with the risen Christ, followed by a hurried dash back to the others, who were hiding behind locked doors. As the day progressed, the agitation in that room got louder and louder. Peter and the other disciples discussed what the women had said and what it might mean. Suddenly two disciples from Emmaus burst into the room and shared how they too had seen the risen Christ. All this culminated with the appearance of Jesus right there in their midst. From silence to agitation, fear and amazement all in the course of a single, amazing Easter day.

We celebrate Easter Sunday and over the course of a few hours slip back into our quiet routines. But at the first Easter, everything moved in the opposite direction: from routine and burial rituals to resurrection; from quiet to commotion. And the shock from that one event has created waves of spiritual turbulence that still roll over us today. If this whole story was simply made-up, a batch of wishful thinking and spiritual metaphors, there is no way the energy and emotional power of Easter could sustain itself for almost 2000 years.

To state the obvious: The focus of Easter is on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Yet, it is also true that resurrection—bodily resurrection—poses just as many challenges for us today as it did for the first disciples long ago. We do the people of Jerusalem a disservice if we look down our modern noses at them and think that they were more primitive than us, more superstitious than us, and therefore their experience of the resurrection is less sophisticated and certainly less scientific than if we’d been there in the upper room. Frankly, they knew a lot more about the grittiness of death than any of us do. When is the last time you prepared a body for burial—when you witnessed a public execution—when you lived in a day and age with an average life span of between 30 and 35 years? They knew a lot about death and they knew that Jesus was dead—he had died on the cross, been buried outside the city, and now suddenly he was alive, in their midst, talking, eating, resurrected. We cannot dismiss their testimony just because it happened long ago.

Now the gospel narrative is quite clear that no one immediately believed Jesus was raised from the dead. Their first thought was that they were seeing a ghost. There’s a funny scene in Acts 12 in which Peter has been put in jail by Herod but

is rescued by an angel of the Lord. Peter then sneaks past sleeping guards and out through several gates to arrive at the house of John Mark. He knocks on the gate and a maid, instead of letting him in, runs back to tell the others that Peter is outside, and they argue with her that it must be Peter's spirit—a ghost—leaving poor Peter agitated and waiting outside, expecting guards to come get him any moment.

It all worked out eventually, but it's no wonder that the first explanation for the Easter resurrection is that it was Jesus' ghost appearing to grieving disciples. To counter that misperception, Jesus ate something in almost every resurrection appearance. He breaks bread with the disciples in Emmaus; he asks for some fish here in the Upper Room; later he will have a breakfast on the seashore with Peter and the other fishermen. It's always been important to talk about the Easter resurrection as a bodily one. In the little letter of Second John, the author speaks strongly against those who question the resurrection, saying "*Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.*" It is precisely this point that is a stumbling block for so many—a fact that was true back then and is still true today.

So let's come at this problem from a different angle for a moment. If I asked you what is the largest living thing on earth, what do you think of: An elephant—a blue whale—a California giant redwood? Well, you're getting warm. Some have argued that the largest living things on earth are Aspen groves. The roots of Aspen trees grow just below the surface and sprout forth new trees at regular intervals. These saplings are connected to the original tree and genetically identical to the parent. One grove of aspen in Utah contains over 47,000 trees spread over 100 acres, all from a single genetic plant interconnected by a shared root network. Learning this information changed how I would have answered the question about the largest living thing on earth; however, that change was only possible because I was open to moving beyond answers limited to animal life and was willing to consider an example from the world of botany.

When the subject of Easter comes up, lots of modern day people say, "I don't believe Jesus rose from the dead." When asked why, they respond, "Well, because people don't come back to life once they're dead"—which pretty much stops the conversation right there. Whatever I might say next, they will reject my arguments since they hold onto a belief system of their own that refuses to allow for the possibility of resurrection. Atheists insist there is no God and then get after Christians for being closed minded, despite the fact that our belief system is more expansive than theirs and we are open to the possibility that God exists and that Jesus' resurrection happened. Part of believing in the resurrection means affirming that we don't know everything about everything in this world, including the miracle of life, and trusting in the reality of a love, a heavenly, sacred love, that is stronger than death.

Why is it important to accept the idea of a bodily resurrection? Why is it valuable to imagine Jesus Christ as fully alive, eating, interacting with his disciples then and lovingly connected to us today? The reasons are both mundane and profound. First, if Jesus Christ was bodily resurrected, then we who are his followers cannot limit ourselves to just spiritual matters. We can't just honor the Christ of Easter through times of pious prayer, meditation, and personal oneness with God. No, we need to deal with flesh and blood things because we follow a flesh and blood, risen Lord. We need to care about the treatment of other bodies—to literally feed the hungry, protect vulnerable children and elderly, break the chains of oppression of modern slavery, and ensure all who live and breathe have basic health care and rights. If it was important to care for the people of this world because God in Jesus was incarnated as a baby in Bethlehem, how much more important is it to care for one another on earth because God in Christ was raised from the dead back into the same flesh and blood reality everyone shares? The first time God acted to get our attention. The second time God acted to make sure we got the point and that we'd get on with the work at hand.

When Christ appeared in the upper room and spoke to his disciples, he didn't give them a lecture on the mechanics of resurrection. He didn't tell them all he'd experienced that Easter day. No, he reminded them of what they already knew from scripture and then sent them out into the world to worship, serve, glorify and witness to a God who is Lord over life and death. Even if people didn't believe them, they were to proclaim what their eyes saw and their hearts knew to be true: Jesus Christ had died and was raised from the dead.

Which leads to the second important reason to believe in a bodily resurrection: Faith is not the confirmation of what you already believe. No, as it says in Hebrews 11:1—*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. Faith is not about security; it's about assurance. Security is something behind which we seek shelter, something designed to protect us from the risks of life. Assurance is what comes to us when, by faith, we wrestle with the risks of life and overcome them. One is a hiding place and harbor from the storm; the other is leaving the harbor to face the storm through faith in God.

Are you willing to risk believing in resurrection—in a resurrected Jesus—in a faith that says flesh and blood and death are not the sole realities of life? That there is something more—literally someone more who alone we worship and serve? I invite you to do this, because the Christ that is alive is the Christ that is with us now and to the end of the age. We are not alone. The threat of death, of hopelessness, of meaninglessness are not part of our world, Christ's world, any longer. That's incredible good news. I'll close with some favorite words from a favorite preacher of mine, Barbara Brown Taylor, who said this about the risen Christ: *We cannot nail him down. We tried once, but he got loose. And ever since then he has been the walking, talking presence of God in our midst, the living presence of God in our lives*. Friends, follow this living, surprisingly present God, made known in the risen Christ. See where he leads you. Go now.