THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*Openings* Luke 24:36-48

So, Jesus had to come to his disciples, and when he did, he had to prove that he wasn’t a ghost because they thought he was dead. The disciples believed this, they knew this because they had seen most of his arrest and crucifixion as it had happened. Moreover, they knew Jesus was dead because he had been executed by the Romans—a group of people who knew very well how to do a proper execution. You could say they trusted that Jesus was dead because the Romans usually did such things with competence and efficiency.

So, there was no room for denying, or disbelieving. The Romans were not just another army. They were the Roman *Empire*, conquering, occupying, oppressing the populace, these were their areas of expertise. So, there was no choice but to come to grips with the outcome: Jesus was dead…

…Except that the women who had gone to the tomb early that morning had returned saying something quite different. They said that the tomb was empty. They said that the stone had been rolled away from the opening, and Jesus’ body was not inside.

Although the disciples had initially dismissed it as “an idle tale” [v. 11], Peter took it upon himself to go and look. He came back confused but he did confirm that the tomb was, indeed, open and empty.

It was all very confusing…but not entirely unexpected or unheard of. As I was preparing this sermon, I came across several stories of people who had been thought to be dead only to shock all of their friends and neighbors by “turning-up,” very much alive. Apparently, this happens every once in a while.

For example, there is the story was about a man named Charles Hubbard of Austin, Texas. A few years ago, Hubbard, a Vietnam veteran, received a letter from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs informing him that he was dead.

What is more, the VA told him that his family needed to return thousands of dollars in benefits and pension money they had sent him while he was dead. A victim of stolen identity, Hubbard discovered that his checking account had been closed by the VA.

So, after a lot of collecting of information and testimony, Hubbard made a good and extensive case for being alive. The VA finally accepted his information. However, they told him, it was going to take eight months for him to be officially “brought back to life.” That was also how long it was going to take them to restore his pension and benefits.

What struck me about Hubbard’s story is the absurdity of him having to prove he was alive, and the red tape he had to go through to do it. I thought of Hubbard because Jesus seems to have the same problem getting the disciples to acknowledge that he is alive, that he has, indeed, been resurrected…*just as he said he would be*.

In the passage we just heard, it is still the first day of the week, Easter Sunday, and this is the third time in one day that he has tried to get the disciples to believe in his resurrection.

The first time was the empty tomb itself, but also the testimony of the women. In Luke 24:8, a few verses before the reading that we heard this morning, the women at first were confused by the empty tomb, but then they were met by two men in dazzling clothes, and this terrified them. Despite this, Luke says, “…they remembered his words and returning from the tomb, they told the eleven and all the rest.”

So, they got over their initial surprise, confusion, and fear. They remembered what Jesus had told them. They believed, and they did what they were supposed to do: they went and told others. They had not actually seen the Risen Christ, himself. They had received the testimony of the men at the tomb, and this opened in them a new confidence to offer their own.

What I want us to think about is the way Jesus’ death on a cross, and Charles Hubbard’s “death” were both accomplished via bureaucratic fiat. What I mean is that both Jesus and Charles were very effectively eliminated by the empires of their time—the Roman Empire, and the Office of the United States Veterans’ Affairs.

Although there are lots of very real differences between the two—for example, the wildly different cultures, the two thousand years that separate them, and the fact that the VA did not, itself, kill Hubbard (except on paper), while the Roman Empire was very sure it *had* executed Jesus; had crucified him until he was dead. Indeed, they must have been confused to find out they did *not* succeed in killing Jesus. So, yes, there are real differences.

However, what I hope we can see is the way in which authorizing entities can, and how they often *do*, define what we believe in and how we respond to life, and to the people around us. In Jesus’ time, the Roman Empire and all of the forces of authority and control insisted that theirs was the only reality; theirs was the only truth.

However, what I want to point out is that in our life with Christ, there are going to be times when we will be asked to recognize the limits of the empires that we live under, and there will be limits to the definitions of life that they often impose and insists on.

Because of this, we are going to have to recommit ourselves to a God whose story will even defy death; will insist that the power of love and compassion for one another is greater than any command or decree of empire. This is what was hindering Peter and the others and making them confused.

Jesus had told them what was going to happen to him. He did not tell them when they first started following him. He had waited until they had seen him in ministry; until they had seen the thousands who were fed, and the many who were healed; until they had seen him calm a storm and rebuke demons processing innocent people; until they had heard his words about the love and the faithfulness of God.

After all of the instruction, and their own witnessing of the powerful love Jesus displayed throughout their time together, they still believed *more* in the power of the human fears and aggression that had crucified Jesus. This is what was confusing them and making them hesitate.

The good news is that Christ understood their confusion and so, unlike the way he had *started* with Cleopas and his partner on the road to Emmaus by opening the Scriptures to them, the story that was just before the one we heard this morning, and unlike the angels who reminded the women at the tomb of his words about his resurrection, Jesus speaks to the disciples first in concrete terms to dispel their confusion. First, he invited them to come close and see his body—not necessarily his wounds, but his flesh and bones. One theologian describes it this way:

*… he begins by showing them his hands and feet. It is as though he understands that those who have been centered in the power structure cannot grasp the truth of the resurrection because they yet believe the Empire’s narrative is the only possible reality. Those on the periphery—the women and unnamed disciples—already recognize that the imperial narrative has failed because it has not served them. They are freed to see* [and] *experience the resurrection that now encounters them in the risen Christ.*

…in his physical body. Christ understood that the disciples who had not believed the women and who had stayed indoors all day afraid—they needed the solidity of his body in order for them to see past their fears, past their own understanding, past their perception of “how the world is.”

They needed, instead, to open their minds to how God was remaking the world through the body of Christ—the body that was crucified, and the body that would come together in his name (ie. the church). It was especially crucial that they come to this knowledge through their physical encounter with the one who had died at the hands of the empire.

We know this, of course. Yet we also know that we have to relearn it over and over again. We know that there will be times when we will be like the disciples. We will be confused and unsure, especially when encountering something new to our experience.

Our good news is that we *can* open our hearts and minds and venture past our own fears, doubts, and confusion. We can *un*learn the ways and the decrees of empire because God can and will open our minds.

The fresh breeze of God’s Spirit is speaking to us even now through the voices of those whom the regular arrangements of empire continues to fail:

* through the cries of the poor,
* through the desperation of refugees,
* through the fears and sorrows of women in need of safe, unhindered reproductive care,
* through the struggles of our GLBTQ brothers and sisters,
* through the devastation of the very land we walk on, and the air we breathe.

All of these—and there are so many, many more—they are all the voices of those who do *not* have their own place or voice in the systems and circles of power in our world. Yet these are the very people Christ wants us to see when we contemplate him. These are the voices and the faces the Risen Christ invited his disciples to see when he showed them his body.

Now, we are his disciples, and he invites us, too, to see him—to see *them*—and to proclaim the good news of God’s love in the very face of the distress and pain we see all around us.

I would like to close with the words of the theologian I quoted earlier, the Rev. Robert Williamson, who wrote this:

[When Jesus showed the disciples his body it was] *an invitation to listen to the tales of those who have seen Jesus at the tomb without dismissing them as idle gossip. It is an invitation to hear the testimony of those who have supped with him along the road, despite their being unknown to us. It is an invitation to acknowledge the bodily witness of those who have borne the brunt of the Empire’s 0us.*

Friends, as we continue on our Easter journey, I pray we will remember that the Risen Christ is walking alongside us, looking for any and all moments of openness in which he may draw our attention to his body and that we may come to care for that body with our own; with the love and care that is ours through Christ; with a love that reaches out to touch his body in every way that may bring healing, and wholeness. Let this be so. Amen.