

Series: The Words of Jesus—Post Resurrection**Title: When Faith Isn't Enough****Text: Luke 24:36-49****A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, May 3, 2009 (Fourth Sunday of Easter)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

It is the fourth Sunday in Easter. Now that may come as a surprise to those of you who were not raised in a more liturgical tradition. You may have thought Easter was over four weeks ago, but in the church year Easter lasts for 50 days until we arrive at Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit gave the church power to be the church. In the Sanctuary we light the Paschal Candle for 50 days to remind us that Jesus is still with us, and we reflect on the meaning of faith in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here at First Presbyterian Church we are focusing on the Words of Jesus in what we call the Post Resurrection appearances to his disciples.

Resurrection is the one doctrine of the church which separates Christianity from all other religions. Yet it is the most difficult doctrine for thinking people to grasp. To see Jesus as a good teacher, a wise and gentle prophet is easy. To believe that Jesus is the Christ, the one whom God chose to reveal God's will upon the earth, and to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God, requires a bold leap of faith which is difficult for many people to make.

Last week at Bright Side I pointed out the obvious in the text we were considering there. It is evident in our text this morning, as well. Not all of the disciples believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It seemed implausible to some then, and there may be some here this morning that have a difficult time with this proclamation. In fact many of us probably live somewhere in between.

Our text this morning comes right after an experience Jesus had with two of his followers who were walking back to their home in the village of Emmaus. They wanted to believe, but the evidence just didn't stack up. Scripture says that it wasn't until Jesus had a meal with them that their eyes were opened in the breaking of the bread. They remembered that last meal he shared with his disciples and how he had said that every time they ate the Passover meal together, they were to remember him in the breaking of the bread.

We understand them, don't we? We want to believe, but we live somewhere in between belief and nonbelief. In fact, we may feel more like the family of actress Helen Hayes. Her husband and her son wanted to encourage her desire to try her hand at cooking her first Thanksgiving Dinner. So in the days leading up to Thanksgiving Day, they gave her words of encouragement telling her that they were looking forward to the big event.

She had never cooked a turkey before, and before serving it, she announced to her husband and her son that if the turkey wasn't any good she didn't want anyone to say a word. She said, *"We will just get up from the table, without comment, and go to a restaurant to eat."*

Mrs. Hayes returned to the kitchen, and when she entered the dining room bearing the turkey on a platter, she found her husband and her son seated at the table with their hats and coats already on.

The Bible can be very comforting to those who may struggle with the dissonance between what we want to believe and what we really believe. In our text this morning we pick up right after the disciples had heard their friends from Emmaus tell the story of how they had met Jesus on the road. The text says: *"While they were discussing this...."* In

other words, they hadn't fully grasped the possibility of the resurrection. They were still in the debate stage. They had their memory of the past when their faith was strong and real, and they had their hope that one day their faith might be rekindled. But for now they were praying that all too familiar prayer: *Lord, I want to believe. Help my unbelief.*

So what does it take to find faith when you are in a place like that? Let's look at what Jesus did for the disciples: 1) He met them right where they were; 2) He helped them to make sense of what they did not understand;

He Met Them Where They Were

Jesus did not chastise them for their lack of faith. In fact, he blessed it. He said, *"Peace be with you."* He says that a lot in these Post Resurrection Appearances. He showed them his hands and his feet. He does that a lot, too. Yet right after he shows them his hands and his feet, there is this strange verse which says, *"While they were in their joy, they were still disbelieving."* Apparently there was still something more that was needed. So what does he do? He has a meal with them. He sits down to dinner with them. He listens to them, and somewhere in the listening their doubt turned to faith again.

Many years ago a friend of mine served as a chaplain at a major medical center in upstate New York. He told me of a call he had received late one night to minister to a family whose child was in the final stages of leukemia. Time was short. The physicians had told the family that the boy had only a few days to live.

During the week my friend made many visits to the family. When the time came for the child to die, he was there to hear the family's anguished and angry cries to God: *"Why, dear God? Why?"*

Several weeks after the boy had died; my friend received a note from the family which he shared with me. The note thanked him for all he had said on the night their child died, which had helped them to find their faith again. I was young in the ministry, and I wanted to know what he had said that was so profound in such a moment, so I asked him to tell me his secret. My friend said, *“I didn’t say a word, Randy. I just listened to their anguish. I stood by them and I prayed with them, but I never said a word that would help them to understand anything. Whatever they heard came from the mouth of God, not my mouth. I never said a word.”*

When Jesus meets his confused disciples, he doesn’t chastise them for their lack of faith. He doesn’t preach to them. He eats with them. He listens to them. He takes up residence with them right where they are, and by his presence in the midst of their despair he convinces them that their journey of faith was not over.

This is what our Stephan Ministers are taught to do. They do not judge. They listen. Words don’t mean a whole lot to people when they are hurting so much they cannot feel the presence of God in the midst of their despair. The ministry of presence is what speaks volumes to people who are bereft. Walking with them until they can find the strength and courage to walk alone again is what really counts.

He Helped Them Make Sense of What They Did Not Understand

The second lesson we learn from our scripture is the importance of helping others to make sense of what they do not understand. After Jesus had the meal with them and listened to the confusion of the disciples, the Bible says he helped them to understand their experience in the light of scripture. The text says that he opened the scriptures and interpreted them in light of his coming from Moses through the Prophets.

Resurrection faith is a biblical faith. God's desire for a saving relationship with the people he created did not begin with Jesus. The Jews remember God's saving love reaching out to human beings begins with the story of the Exodus, the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, working through the Judges and the Kings and finally through the Prophets. The story of God's love is not limited to Jesus. The resurrection is the story of God seeking relationships with people who are captive in Egypt, and it reaches its crescendo by God providing a way back into a relationship with Him through the resurrection of Jesus. Now that is a Bible Study I would have loved to attend. Once they understood all that had taken place was part of a larger plan, the situation of the disciples was transformed. Things didn't seem nearly as bad as it had just hours before.

During her spring break from her first year of school, I took Emma, my granddaughter, on her first trip to Washington, D.C. On our first night in Washington, we went to see the Lincoln Memorial and the Viet Nam War Memorial. I am always humbled by both of them.

That evening, as we walked along the wall with all the names on it, Emma kept asking questions. Usually, as you walk down the path to the apex of the wall, there is a hush that falls. However, Emma wasn't into the hush. She needed answers to her questions: *"Dad-Dad (my grandfather name), why are all these names on this wall?"* *"Dad-Dad, why did they have to die?"* *"Dad-Dad, why is it so important to remember their death?"*

There was a Vietnam Vet visiting the memorial that night who overheard her questions. He called us over and gave us his answer. He said, *"Honey, I fought with these men in a war a long way away, and when I came home I found people wanted to*

forget what many of us had done. They built this wall as a reminder to all of us that there were men and women who gave their lives for their country.”

Then he turned to the wall and began to trace one name in particular, “*This man right here gave his life for me. He gave his life for me.*” It was hard for that man to get his heart and mind around the sacrifice of his friend, so he keeps telling the story over and over again, and each time he tells it, he understands a little more.

We have that problem, too. There is, of course, someone who gave his life for us. However, we need to make sense of that story, so we tell it over and over again. Ours is a faith rooted in the writings of the Holy Scriptures, so we look at it in light of what we know of the promise of the Messiah in the Old Testament. We read the disciples eye witness accounts in the Gospels. We examine it from the perspective of epistles; the early writings of the church. We think about it in light of what other men and women of faith have said in a different time and place through the study of theology. We tell our own stories and listen to the testimonies of others so the story won’t grow cold for us. We listen to the story and we tell the story over and over again from different perspectives so we can understand the depth and breadth of God’s love for us.

Conclusion

So here we are; four weeks after Easter. We are about to share a meal with Jesus. We are going to let him meet us right where we are as we share the meal which he gave us as his followers. We come seeking understanding of what this means for the time and place in which we live, and we do it so we can share the good news we have received with others. Welcome to the table of the Lord.