

Sermon – The Third Sunday of Easter

Luke 24: 36-48

In the days after Jesus' death a sense of resignation probably descended on his disciples and followers. The profound man they had come to know as the son of God, the long-promised Messiah was no more. He had been unjustly scapegoated by the religious authorities worried that he was going to lead an insurrection that might cause their loss of power and control. Amongst the religious authorities there may have been a sense of smugness that they had 'got their man,' they had eliminated a potential threat.

The name and knowledge of Jesus had spread through the land. Jesus' name was on the lips of almost everyone, be they follower or accuser. Jesus had succumbed to death and had been taken off the cross and laid to rest in a new tomb not far from where his life ebbed away. If you go to the Holy Land and to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, you might be surprised at how close the reported sites of his crucifixion and internment are. My guess is about 120 feet.

On the day after that terrible sabbath, his body was found to be missing from the tomb. There was great uncertainty about what had happened. Had it been stolen? Was it taken for ransom? The Roman's thought that his disciples had taken it to raise a conspiracy. However, the trauma the disciples of Jesus had experienced suppressed their memory, that in fact, he had defeated death and had risen from the grave as he foretold.

After the disciples realized that Jesus body had disappeared from the tomb they did what most of us would do. They gathered together to try to understand what had happened and to comfort each other in what must have been a time of great uncertainty and fear. The room where they gathered might have been filled with immense energy as they argued amongst themselves about what had happened. Or it might have been filled with the quietness of intense grief where the pain and confusion brings on a profound inability to speak.

Resurrection for the disciples of Jesus, and for everyone who has followed Jesus from then and now, is a baffling phenomenon. Resurrection is not just resuscitation of the deceased as we understand it, it is not waking from a coma or other such medical condition. Resurrection is wholly different. The old body, the physical body changes into a new body, and the new body comes to life in a physical form that is unknown to those familiar with the past identity.

The witnesses to Jesus risen body tell us that they did not recognize him until he spoke and showed them his wounds. It was then that their eyes and hearts were opened to the profound sense of joy and gratitude that their messiah lived once again.

Jesus knew better than any one of them that they would be confused, saddened and traumatized by his crucifixion and death. So his appearances to them were an effort by him to reassure them of the truth of his resurrection. The Apostle and writer Luke sets out four proofs that Jesus offered in his account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances:

The first is that Jesus asked them to look at him, his hands and his feet especially. To look was not to glance, nor was it to look superficially. It was to look at him deeply and to find in their gaze the inner being, the essential spirit that was, and remained, who this man presented. He was not a ghost, a spiritual manifestation of the past Jesus, like Moses and Elijah were when Jesus met them as he was transfigured. The risen Jesus was more than that. He was flesh and blood, scared from the wounds inflicted on his body and real.

The second proof of his risen physical self was that he was hungry, and that he needed to eat. Luke tells us that in the disciples' joy they were still disbelieving yet feeling a sense of wonder. So many mixed emotions for them. When he asked for food he was asking for the mundane, something to nourish him and further evidence he was not a ghost.

The third proof was that Jesus opened their minds to understand scripture. It was probably their 'aha' moment. They knew the writings of Moses and the prophets well, and could probably recite all the psalm from heart. Yet, despite Jesus teaching them of his return, they had lost sight of the very texts that formed them and their daily lives.

When Jesus opened their minds to understand, all the pieces of the jigsaw would have fallen into place. We all know what it is like to finally understand some piece of knowledge in such a way that it and other things all make sense. It is a liberating moment and a moment of affirmation that what they are witnessing was indeed happening just as it was foretold in their holy scriptures.

The last proof was that they indeed were witnesses. Preordained to be together to experience the risen lord come amongst them, to show them his wounds, to speak with them and to break bread with them once again. What they had seen and what they now understood was to be told to the world.

Jesus commissioned them to tell this mighty story, first in Jerusalem, the most important city in Judaism, and then to the world as they went out to be the apostles Jesus had called them to be. We come together this day, and all Sundays, to give thanks for the experience Jesus offered them because it was their witness that allowed us to come to faith in the first place.

The message was crystal clear – repentance and forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed to the world. The initial tentative steps they took are laid out in the second act of Luke's writing, the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The book is a wonderful exposé of the life of Peter, the rise of Paul and the deliberate paths they took to ensure the message of Jesus went to both the Jews and the gentiles. The message that they took out is the same one we take out into the world as the apostles of Jesus Christ.

The world then and now remains largely hostile to Jesus' message of hope through our repentance and his forgiveness of our sins. Fear lived in the hearts of the disciples of Jesus following his death and in the early hours of the third day when he came to be with them. Fear,

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that every present powerful emotion, was present was Jesus revealed himself to them as well. Fear of the unknown, fear of the power of the moment, fear of not understanding what they were seeing. They did however overcome their fears. But soon enough as they set out on their mission, fears rose up again as they confronted the hostile world with the new message of hope.

The past few months has seen the tragedy of gun violence return to our nation after a brief hiatus during the first year of the pandemic. Young black men have been killed by police bullets once again. Both Daunte Wright's death and Anton Toledo's death are tragedies compounded by fear both by these young men and by the police.

The tragedy of the recent mass shootings in Indianapolis, Atlanta and Boulder not only retraumatize the victims and their families but stir up fears in every American that one day a mass shooting might claim one of us or one of our family.

The only antidote to the complex issue of gun violence is for a societal repentance of the violence caused by scourge of allowing automatic weapons in our communities and a failing healthcare system that doesn't meet the needs of families with loved ones who struggle with mental illness. The intersection of these two issues has brought these never-ending tragedies to our lives once again.

Repentance, as Jesus taught is followed by forgiveness. Forgiveness from God and forgiveness from ourselves and our neighbors. These tragic events do not in themselves create our broken society, they expose it. But for these painful events, we might become all too complacent and forget that people of flesh and blood, neighbors and friends die every day from gun violence. These events are reminders that the ministry Jesus commissioned from the apostles is our vital ministry today, just in a new world.

When we look, truly look at the world God created, and look using the lens of scripture, we see God's plan for the salvation of the world. True salvation comes to us through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through suffering and joy. God seeks to be reconciled to us, to seek us out in the midst of a turbulent world. Living for Jesus is about mutuality and truly looking to see those that have been broken by society's ills.

When God opens our hearts and minds so that we see him in all of his risen glory, we will see the world in a different way, it will take on a different hue and will beckon us to be a part of the healing we need. To look at the world without taking action is to remain blind but to truly see and to take action is to nurture God's plan of salvation that our world dearly needs.

May God bless you.

Amen.