

***Four Elements of Meeting Jesus:
Doubt, Food, Scripture, Witness***
Luke 24: 36-49

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Are you tired of Easter yet? The petals have already fallen from the tulips we bought for worship that day. The Reese's eggs have all been eaten. We had a big day two weeks ago, then got back to normal. But the church has traditionally celebrated Easter for 40 days—until we cap it off with Ascension and Pentecost. Then we keep celebrating Easter every Sunday of the year, meeting on the first day of the week because that is the day Jesus rose from the dead.

This week the lectionary takes us to another story of the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples. It's one of the less familiar accounts, less well known than his appearing to "doubting" Thomas or the story of the two walking on the road to Emmaus, which comes just before this one. Here Jesus stands, as he does in John's version that features Thomas, among the eleven followers—and I think both Luke and John want to suggest that Jesus appears among his followers still, that as we gather here we should be alert to the possibility that none other than Jesus could stand in our midst and give us his peace. This is not only a story about history but a paradigm of church life. That's what I've been thinking about this text: the four elements of the story reflect our own experience of the presence of Jesus in the gathered community of believers.

When Jesus shows up this time (in Luke 24:36) it is while the disciples are talking about "this." What is "this"? Well, Cleopas and his friend have just turned around from walking to Emmaus and headed back to base in Jerusalem with a wild story. They told the other students of Jesus that a stranger appeared on the road and showed them from the scriptures that the Messiah had to die and then be glorified, and then when they ate with him they suddenly recognized him as Jesus, alive and eating with them. Then he disappeared. But the gang in Jerusalem had their own story: Yeah, we know, Jesus is alive and he has appeared to Simon Peter! (No mention that he appeared first to women but no one would believe them; you wonder if Luke is taking a dig at sexism in the early Christian community.) So the entire group is talking about this: that Jesus, whom they know for sure was dead, is now alive. They all believe this. They believe it the way you believe a friend's story to be true, although some of them believed their own experience.

And yet, while they are talking about this, Jesus appears in their midst and says "Shalom, y'all." Even though they have been telling each other that they believe, they are terrified when Jesus actually shows up. This is the story of almost every church almost every Sunday morning. What would we do if Jesus actually showed up? How would we react if his presence in our midst was undeniable and he really spoke to us? This is a question we face in the season of Easter and just as acutely in the season of Pentecost. What will we do if Jesus appears either in body or in spirit? What if a voice speaks? What if the fire falls?

Jesus asks, "Why are you afraid, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" No one answers that question, least of all Jesus. Why *do* doubts arise in our hearts, even in the Easter season? Who can say? But the answer that the *story* gives is that doubt is normal. It's part of the human condition. Even these people who had known Jesus in the flesh, who had heard the predictions, who had fresh reports from eyewitnesses—even *they* had a hard time believing, a hard time processing the idea that what they had hoped for and then saw dashed by cruel powers was now revived. Having given in to despair, it was hard to shift gears to hope. Having accepted

death as the end, it was hard to accept that death was the beginning. Don't you think this is why Luke is writing this account for people a generation removed from these events? Even those who were *there* had doubts. That does not mean it is not true, and that does not mean that you cannot believe.

So if Jesus appears here at Harbor Church this morning, do not be surprised if doubt fills your heart. If there is a part of you that hears Jesus speaking or senses his presence among us, there is another part of you that will say it must be something else. Those first disciples had a part of them, the biggest part, which said it was a ghost. Most of us don't believe in ghosts anymore than we believe that Jesus can appear to us, so we find another explanation: it's just emotion, I'm being manipulated, it's a memory of a childhood experience, it's a breeze, it's a hangover. Whatever.

Granted, the disciples in Luke had some advantages. Jesus let them see his hands and feet up close; he let them touch him. He even ate a fish as further proof that he could not be a ghost. But we have the advantage of having the church. The church's existence is proof that he really rose—how else can you explain it? We have the advantage of history—all the believers whose examples inspire us, the advantage of having the New Testament, the advantage of the witness of our parents and friends, the advantage of books and movies about Jesus. Nevertheless, it is not easy. We have a hard time believing—just like the first followers, but they did become followers after all, and so shall we.

If doubt is the first element of meeting Jesus, the second element is food. No kidding. Luke says that while the disciples were still disbelieving for all their joy, Jesus said, "Have you got anything to eat?" Since this story takes place on Block Island, they give him some broiled fish. John's gospel has a story about Jesus eating fish with them, too. There's nothing symbolic about that fish. It's just what they liked to eat, and here it is proof that Jesus is not a ghost. That is, he's not still dead and just appearing to them. He is actually alive—and hungry. He has a real body that digests food.

There is of course a big theological point being made here. As I preached on Easter Sunday, the resurrection is not about the survival of the soul but the renewal of actual bodies, and that is what both Luke and John are at pains to demonstrate against those who would treat Jesus as pure spirit. The risen Jesus is still a fish-eatin' man, not some floating force field. I won't linger on that point, but I do want to quote what the modern Catholic theologian Karl Rahner said about it:

And he did not rise in order finally to depart from hence, not so that the travail of death which gave birth to him anew might transfer him to the life and light of God and he would leave behind him the dark bosom of the earth empty and without hope. For he rose again in his *body*. That means he has already begun to transform this world into himself. He has accepted the world forever. He has been born again as a child of the earth, but of the transfigured, liberated earth, the earth which in him is eternally confirmed and eternally redeemed from death and futility.

He rose, not to show that he was leaving the tomb of the earth once and for all, but in order to demonstrate that precisely that tomb of the dead - the body and the earth - has finally changed into the glorious, immeasurable house of the living God and of the God-filled soul of the Son....He rose again to reveal that through his death the life of freedom and beatitude remains established forever within the narrow limits and sorrow of the earth, in the depth of its heart. [Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons, and Meditations*]

But there is another meaning in this story of eating the fish. I think it says something about the role of food in the Christian life from the beginning. When the disciples who don't recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus finally sit down with him for dinner, then they recognize him in the act of sharing food. Just think of how many times in the gospels Jesus appears eating. He eats with his friends, with those he seeks to convert, with his critics, with his students. Always eating. The only time fasting comes up is when people come asking Jesus why his followers *don't* fast; they are always eating. Jesus says "The Son of Man comes eating and drinking, and people call me a glutton and a wine-bibber." He is practicing a festive faith, not a restrictive one. We never have to apologize for church potlucks, which some have called the only Baptist sacrament. The gospels suggest that potlucks are the way we experience Jesus in our midst.

Everybody knows that Jesus is just as real at coffee hour as he is in the worship hour. Right? And while to some of you "potlucks" refers to something that happens only rarely around here, the truth is that there is a potluck supper at Bible study every Thursday night and at Soup and Song Coffeehouse every Friday. We bring food and share it and build relationships in a way we couldn't if we just had teaching or performing. It's not that food is magical, but it's so essential to what it means to be human that sharing it is sharing life. And when we really share life together as believers, Jesus appears in our midst. We know him in *koinonia*, fellowship, which happens most naturally around the table. It's likely that in the earliest churches, meeting in homes, they shared a common meal every Sunday, not just the little snack we call Communion. Maybe with the obesity epidemic in this country, every Sunday potlucks would not be a good idea, but I would like us to think of sharing food as a Christian practice.

The third element of meeting Jesus is the teaching of the scriptures. Some people would think, "If you have Jesus right there, why do you need the Bible?" But it is clear from this story and from the Emmaus Road story that one way Jesus makes himself known is through the Bible. In this story the point is that Jesus opens their mind to understand that the Hebrew prophets themselves had taught that the Messiah must suffer. His death was not unexpected by God. But to me there is a more general point: the risen Jesus has not stopped being a rabbi. He is still a Bible teacher. Our experience of the risen Jesus is tied to the reading of scripture, through which he continues to speak to us—by interpreting them, emphasizing certain things, showing us how they point to him and to his kingdom.

Among evangelical Christians it is a commonplace that the way to encounter God is to read the Bible. You find the same thing in most Catholic teachers of spirituality. Among mainline Protestants, not so much. When we did an anonymous survey of the congregation a while back, I don't think one person admitted to reading the Bible every day. Since I was raised Southern Baptist where you were asked every Sunday to check on your offering envelope whether you read your Bible every day in the past week, I find the lack of interest in the Bible a little surprising, the way a Muslim would be confused if you said you were a Muslim but you never read the Quran. I'm not trying to get you into any legalistic habit, but I do want you to think that if you haven't heard from Christ in a while and are wondering if he's still alive, maybe you should look for him and listen for him while you are taking a little bit of the Bible and meditating on it for 10-15 minutes. It won't hurt you, and Jesus may show up.

The fourth element of meeting Jesus is being a witness. That's the way Luke ends this story. Jesus says that the Hebrew scriptures not only said that the Messiah must die and rise, but "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in Messiah's name to all nations." The message for everyone is that forgiveness has been accomplished. That's the good news.

Therefore repent—that is, therefore, turn around, reorient yourself, because you have been forgiven by God through Messiah’s death on your behalf. We are now living in Messiah’s kingdom, the long-expected reign of God in which everything will be made right and we are made right with God.

Then Jesus adds: “You are witnesses of these things.” You are witnesses just like the people that heard Trayvon Martin crying. You saw and heard something that you report to other people. You are not a witness until you experience the presence of the risen Jesus in your own life. But once his continuing life becomes real to you and gets inside you, you cannot keep it to yourself as some kind of secret or something it’s not polite to talk about. Once you know him, you are a witness. Your changed life is a witness. And when the subject of Jesus or God comes up or their names are used flippantly, you can say, “Oh, I know *him*!” That does not mean that you are a person who never doubts. That does not mean that you are a bully. It means that somehow through sharing food and Bible study and worship, Jesus made himself known to you and you can no more deny it than you can deny that you are alive. D. T. Niles of India famously defined evangelism as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.” There is nothing imperialistic or arrogant about it. If you have come to know the risen Jesus Christ—and that is a big IF—you are a witness. If you have received his love, you have to pass it on.