

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
3rd Sunday in Easter – April 26, 2009
Luke 24: 36b-48

Joy and Disbelief and Wonder

Does doubt seem out of place to you in the season of Easter? Do honest fear or grief-soaked tears feel out of place in the middle of sung Alleluias and shouts of “He is Risen?” Those questions might sound odd, but I think many of us wonder about it. Because we are still in the season of Eastertide – the season of proclaimed joy and hope. We are still singing Easter hymns and special responses of praise. The colors in the sanctuary are still white and gold, the colors of resurrection new life.

We walk into this place and we remember that we are people defined by the **full** news of the Gospel—that we might be able to kill God’s love, but that we cannot keep it dead and buried¹. We are a people who claim that Easter always rises. That hope always rises. That God’s power always rises. That Love always rises. We are an Easter people.

But we are an Easter people living in a still-broken, not yet fully made whole, world. Just consider this past week. This past week was the week in which we remembered the anniversaries of the Oklahoma City bombing, the Branch Davidian episode in Waco, and the killings in Columbine. This was a week in which we heard all over the news details involving our CIA and the treatment of detainees after 9/11. This was a week in which we read that the number of homeless children in Dallas has increased by 15% in the last two years. This was a week in which General Motors reported it would close some of its plants for 9 weeks this summer instead of 2. And this was a week in which we had church members or their families taken to the hospital for a pacemaker, or for a surgery for possible cancer, or in a coma. All of that has happened in just one week during this season of Easter.

So how are we supposed to do it? How might we live as Easter people in a still-broken, not yet fully made whole, world? I suppose we could pretend that inexplicable brokenness does not exist. We could attribute a reason or a cause for everything painful that happens in order to feel like we can keep it from happening to us or those we love. Homeless kids? Their parents must not try hard enough. Columbine? Too many violent video games. Living such an illusion would take a lot of our energy, but we could do it. I’ve seen people do it.

Or, we could pretend that since we are Easter people, we no longer have any doubt, or feel honest fear, or cry grief-soaked tears. We could try and live as the “happy Christian” who claims that any feeling other than joy must indicate a lack of faith. I’ve got Jesus in my heart so I am not allowed to be sad or scared or overwhelmed. That would mean I don’t trust enough. That would mean that I was not faithful enough. Living such an elaborate charade would close us off to ourselves and to each other, but we could do it. I’ve seen people do it.

But perhaps we might find another way to live by looking at the first disciples on their first Easter eve. How did they handle the dissonance of “He is Risen” and fear? How did they handle the balance of Easter joy and Good Friday brokenness? In the beginning, that dissonance was not an issue because they simply did not believe that Jesus had risen. Even though Easter good news had broken out in their world that morning, the disciples were still huddled together in fear that evening. Even though the women had already told them that the tomb was empty, they had just blown it off as an idle tale. And even though the two travelers from Emmaus told them that the risen Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread, the disciples could believe their testimony either.

Now Luke does not tell us the disciples' exact reaction to the Emmaus Road testimony, but given their history, I would imagine that the disciples were very skeptical. "How did you not recognize him?" Simon Peter might have queried. "Either it is Jesus or it is not." "And why bread?" James could have asked. "I thought he told us at Passover last Thursday night that he would not eat with us again until the kingdom of heaven had arrived. And I don't know if you have noticed, but it sure does not look like heaven has broken out to me!" If the disciples' reaction to the Emmaus travelers was anything like their reaction to the women, then I can easily see them with their arms crossed across their chests and doubtful grimaces on their faces.

And we understand their skepticism and doubt. It might only be the third Sunday of Easter, but after a week full of news and events like this past week, we might find ourselves crossing our arms and grimacing. "Doesn't look much like Easter to me. Little kids without homes. So much pain. Can't even hear the echoes of the Hallelujah Chorus anymore." When we are honest, we understand the skepticism and the doubt carried by the disciples—even on the first evening of Easter.

On that first Easter evening, the disciples were scared and tired and sick of all of it. Their hearts had been broken. They had thought that Jesus was the one. But instead, Jesus had been betrayed, handed over, and killed. His body had been buried and sealed in a tomb. End of story. Sure they heard some nonsense about empty tombs and vanishing strangers, but really. It had been three days since Jesus had died and all they had left was grief. All they had left was their fear. All they had left was their unbelief and doubt. And I am sure they had absolutely no problem in voicing it. "He is risen? Idle tale. Seen on the way to Emmaus? Wishful thinking. It sure does not look like Easter to me."

But let us notice what happens when they are honest about their grief and their fear, their unbelief and their doubt. Let us notice what happens when they speak of their inability to see much resurrection newness in a still-broken, not yet fully made whole, world. *None of it kept the risen Jesus away from them.* Their honest grief did not keep him away. Their utter disbelief did not keep him away. Their doubts and their fears, their huddled posture and their crossed arms – none of it kept Jesus away. As a matter of fact, Jesus chose to come and be with them **precisely** in the middle of all of it. Their risen Lord chose that time to come and help them open their eyes and recognize him.

"Peace be with you," were the first words out of Jesus' mouth. And Luke reports the disciples were startled and their grief was replaced by complete terror. Maybe they were afraid because they thought he was a ghost. Or maybe they were afraid because they thought he would be angry with them for abandoning him. Whatever the reason, their Risen Lord came among them and they reacted not with joy, not with excitement, not with trumpets and shouts of "He is Risen Indeed." No, they responded with complete terror. But again, the grace-filled good news is that Jesus was still not dissuaded from being with them

Even though his disciples were terrified of him, Jesus did not throw up his hands in frustration and leave. Instead, he asked them why they were frightened and why their hearts were full of doubt. And then, he did something incredibly gracious. He tried to help them make room for joy and hope to sit alongside their grief and fear.

And Jesus carved out that room by getting concrete with them. He showed them his hands and his feet. And when those disciples looked, they saw the same hands that had clasped their own in prayer; the same hands that had lifted children to his knee; the same hands that had healed and made clean; the same hands that had blessed bread and broken it; the same hands that were marked by nails and by pain. And after they had all examined his hands, touching them, turning them over, maybe baptizing them with their tears, they then looked at his feet. And they saw the same feet that had walked miles upon miles beside them on dusty roads; the same feet that rested in the waters of the Jordan and in the Sea of Galilee whenever it got too hot; the

same feet that trudged the road to Golgotha; the same feet that were marked by the tools of crucifixion and death. And after they bent down and examined his feet, they looked back up to his face.

And even after all that, after seeing his hands and his feet and seeing that it was indeed their Jesus, Luke writes, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering...” I think that is the best description I have ever heard of what it is like to live as Easter people in a still-broken, not yet fully made whole, world. “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering...” Joy and disbelief and wonder, all mixed up together. Is that the way you feel sometimes? Joy and disbelief and hope and wonder, all mixed up together.

It can seem like such an act of cognitive dissonance – living as an Easter people in an obviously still-broken, not yet fully made whole, world. But we can see from the disciples’ story that this struggle has been ongoing from the very first Easter evening. The struggle might just be an integral part of what it even means to be a disciple of the crucified and risen Jesus. As a matter of fact, Presbyterian preacher Frederick Buechner goes so far as to say that if you do not share this struggle for faith, this mixture of joy and disbelief and wonder, then you are either kidding yourself or you are asleep. Because it is neither easy nor simplistic to live as God’s Easter people in this world.

We are a people who claim that “He is Risen” as we go and stand behind the serving line down at the Bridge. We are a people who hum the Hallelujah chorus while interviewing for job after job after job. We are a people who purposefully call a service after a death not a funeral service, but a service of witness to the resurrection. We are a people who experience this strange mixture of joy and disbelief and wonder, just like those first disciples.

But furthermore, just like those first disciples, we too can find a gracious reality in that kind of honest struggle. Because, as we see in this resurrection story from Luke, that struggle, that mixture, may just be what keeps us open and ready to recognize the presence of our risen Lord.

That is exactly what happened for those disciples. The mingling of their disbelief and their wonder and their joy seemed to prompt Jesus to try again to meet them where they were, even eating a bite of fish in order to open their eyes so they might recognize him. And eventually, with a bit more persuading and even some Bible study, they did. They finally recognized him as their Jesus and finally recognized themselves as his Easter people.

But if they had simply pretended that everything was okay or that they were perfectly okay, they might not have been so open to the Risen Lord’s presence. They might not have been so ready to recognize him. If they had simply pretended that everything was okay or that they were perfectly okay, they might not have needed the presence of the Risen Lord anyway.

But they did not pretend to be anyone other than who they were—God’s Easter people who often felt a strange mixture of joy and disbelief and wonder at it all. And in that honest and open struggle made known to God, Jesus came and stood among them and spoke words of recognition and peace. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him. In the middle of their joy and disbelief and wonder, they recognized him.

May it be so with you and me, as well, even in those weeks when we find ourselves with crossed arms more often than open hands, and grimaces more often than smiles. May we, like those disciples, be as wide open and honest in our struggle so that we, too, will be ready to recognize our Risen Lord when he comes and stands among us, trying to open our eyes, trying to help us recognize him. Because he will. Because he already does.

ⁱ This is one of my favorite quotations from Rev. William Coffin. I have heard it many times in my own father’s preaching and have read it in many of Coffin’s books. I have no idea where it was originally written down.