

“Playing Catch Up”

I John 3: 1-7, Luke 24: 36-48

3rd Sunday of Easter/B, April 30, 2006

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Many of you may be familiar with the popular television program “24.” As I studied the scripture this week, this program came to mind. Each episode covers one hour of a particular day. I am not sure of the details as I have only seen the show a few times, however as best as I can figure out, it involves secret agents, political intrigue, terrorists, a fictitious double crossing president and an agent that tries to save the world. Those of you who watch it more faithfully can fill in the details.

Now, you might wonder, how does this connect to the scripture for today? Well, as we hear the various Gospel writers tell their version of what happened on that third day, it feels as though they utilize the dramatic mechanism employed by “24.” Each week, bit by bit, the story unfolds. First we hear the women’s story, how the angel sends them to tell the others that Jesus goes ahead of them to Galilee. Next we hear Thomas insist on receiving his own proof of the resurrection. Then we meet the disciples on the road to Emmaus where Jesus appears to them and reveals himself in the breaking of bread. They are like hourly accounts of that resurrection day. Each Gospel writer focuses on different people and different parts of the story. We experience a heightened sense of drama and anticipation as the story continues to unfold. In this way the readings remind us that Easter is not simply a singular event, but a season of renewal and rebirth.

In today’s installment, Jesus greets the disciples with the familiar salutation “Peace be with you.” He hopes to ease their fears, but instead his greeting leaves them bewildered. In fact, Luke says when they finally realize who this is they were “disbelieving for joy.” How might you respond if on your way to church this morning you looked in your rear view mirror and saw Jesus sitting in the back seat of your mini van? Their encounter was much like this. Jesus tries to convince them that it is he. He even invites them to touch his hands and feet to assure them of this. However, despite Jesus’ gentle invitation they are reluctant to believe. Luke says, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” When Jesus sees that they are having a hard time accepting that it is he, he asks them for something to eat. This may seem like an odd request, however, if he were a ghost, they would not be able to touch him nor would he be able to share a meal with them.

After eating a bit, Jesus continues his role as teacher. He reminds them of the things he has already taught them and teaches them again about the resurrection. It is real. He has risen from the dead to complete his work among them. He needs them to not only accept that it is he, that he has risen as he said he would, but he also needs them to understand something more fundamental. They are not simply to tell others they have seen the risen Lord. Our mission is to proclaim the repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. He concludes by saying “now you shall be witnesses to this.”

Their response is a profound mixture of belief and doubt, ecstatic happiness with an undercurrent of protesting disbelief. No matter how many times or how many ways Jesus told them before his death what to expect, they could never truly understand. It is just too much for them to handle. They are shaken, trembling, confused yet exceedingly joyful!

This is all part of the plan. Jesus completes his journey by coming back to them to commission their ministry. However, Jesus does not want his appearance to paralyze the disciples. This juxtaposition of joy with disbelieving and wondering can strike us at the same time as both odd and yet totally human. The writer Maren Tirabassi uses the phrase “doubting and faithing” to describe this experience. She sees faith as a verb, some that we do not something we possess. We make the journey through doubting, through disbelief, through wonder in order to arrive at the faithing part. Once we have gone through this process, then we can witness. It is not unlike the grieving process that people undergo when they lose someone dear to them. When the pain is raw, it is difficult to say much of anything that makes sense. We need time and space before we can do this.

A minister recalls a young man he worked with in pre marital counseling (call him Jack) describe how amazed he was when he discovered the women of his dreams also liked him (call her Samantha.) Jack said, “I was high as a kite. Off the planet! Yet at the same time I could not believe it. I could not believe that this gorgeous woman could love a bloke like me.” He says that as Jack said this, Samantha looked on with a sparkling love in her eyes. There was no doubt that she did love him deeply. Jack went on: “Y’know there are some times still, after 19 months and 23 days of proof, when I still wonder if I am dreaming? It seems too good to be true. I have to pinch myself.” That kind of love leaves us disbelieving for joy.

We can understand this disbelieving for joy, this mixture of doubt and ecstasy. This sort of thing shakes us to our very core. By nature we are a lot like our brother Thomas. We convince ourselves that our brain has to catch up with our heart, our mind has to catch up with their feelings. This does not surprise Jesus. He knows this about us. Touch my hands, he says, watch me eat, and then you will believe that what I say is true. We are so reluctant to acknowledge the still small voice screaming within us. Even when we know in our gut something is true, we want “proof.” We are so mistrustful of mystery, that which we can not explain. We miss so much when we hold back, when we insist on having our mind catch up with our heart. If we give it enough time, our brain will take over and mess everything up.

Jesus says, Go with it. Listen to your heart. Let the Spirit guide you. We like to see ourselves as rational people. We like to presume that we arrive at knowledge in an orderly fashion, step by logical step. What happens with Jesus, now and always, blows that process out of the water. Life is so seldom as orderly or rational as we would like. More often, we get a moment of insight, or a sharp hunch, or a bright intuition. Then later we set out to test and prove it.

All too often, our minds struggle to keep up with our heart. Whether you are a newly formed disciple of Christ, or you have been following Jesus all your 40, 50, 60 or more years, I believe the joy of discipleship is that we never have it all figured out. Although we hear these stories year after year, there is always some new truth, some new insight to be revealed. That is the mystery of faith. Belief, the giving of one’s heart to something, does not arrive complete, in a flash. All our questions are not answered immediately. One preacher says “there remains the precious Light, sometimes bright, sometimes a faint glow, that leads us on and on and on. We press on, day after day, year after year.”

When we are young, it may feel as though that light burns quite brightly. Each time we experience one of those precious “aha” moments, it fuels that light and keeps it aglow. The confirmation class has gathered in retreat this weekend. With their teachers, they are beginning a process that some might see as the end of their confirmation experience. They will return home having written the beginning of a faith statement. In the coming weeks, they will flesh this statement out before they present it to their teachers, sponsors and deacons. What they articulate about their faith never fails to move or

inspire me. They have the courage to name what it is they believe and don't believe, what they know to be true in their 15 year old minds, and what they continue to question. Many of you, parents, grandparents, neighbors, church members and sponsors have helped them to discern what it is they do or do not believe. This is both the miracle and the mystery of faith. It is a miracle that in this day and age, God continues to speak to us, to reveal God self to us, to be present to us as light and life. It is a mystery how we come to recognize the risen Christ in our midst, in the face of the stranger, or in the twinkle in the eye of one that loves us so deeply and unashamedly.

To know and admit that we do not possess all the answers is a sign of the Holy Spirit at work in us. Even if we believe in the risen Christ, with all passion and certainty, the questioning wonder remains, as well it should. We are to worry when there is no more wonder or disbelief. As long as we live in this human form, we will experience times when we disbelieve with joy. My mind is always trailing behind my experience of the love of Christ for me. It is a gift too good to be true. It is something I will never deserve. I continue to disbelieve with joy and move toward gracious acceptance one precious moment at a time.

What happens now? What does it mean to be a witness to the gospel, a witness to the Good News, a witness to God, a witness to Christ, and a witness to the Spirit? First, we must not keep silent. We don't have to shout or bully people into believing, but somehow the world must see that we believe in the Risen Christ, that the power of the resurrection to forgive and to heal is real. Jesus commissions us to take the message of unconditional love and forgiveness to all peoples and to witness to this message, to share it, speak it, spread it, teach it and most importantly, to the best of our abilities, to live it.

In the epistle lesson today John says "we are God's children right now. What we shall finally become is not yet clear, but we know that when the son of God appears we shall be like him, as we look on him as he really is." None of us knows precisely what the future holds. Just when we think we have our life planned out, something happens to demolish those well-laid plans. There are things that our rational mind can never fully comprehend. That is the essence of faith. However, this does not discredit our joy, or our love, or our hope in the risen Christ. It is precisely at these moments when our hope, love and joy may be most powerfully real.

Jesus yearns for us to be swept away, to have the faith of a child. It is our heart that will lead us where we need to go, bring us to what we need to see and inform what we need to say, if only we let it. Our culture teaches us to forgive and forget. Perhaps the resurrection teaches us something different, to remember and forgive. This is what we need to witness to the world. Resurrection is not something we can logically dismantle into its various parts. It is not a puzzle that fits neatly together. It is God's way of saying I love you, that fear and wonder are real, but hope and reconciliation are even more real. Now and always, may we give into that spirit of joyful disbelief that empowers our faith in the risen Lord. Amen