

Easter 3B 18 April 2021
Luke 24:36b-48
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Let's pray:

Easter lasts for 50 days for Christians. Most of our culture thinks it's over when we've managed to Hoover up the last of the chocolate and the children have come down from their sugar highs. But long after the clearance sales have made way for the new winter fashions, the Church is still celebrating Easter.

One thing worth noting is that for a holiday that's supposed to be about new life and resurrection and the Glory of God and for some reason, chocolate (any excuse hey?), we really don't get much of that in the resurrection accounts. What we do get in the stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances is a great deal of fear, doubt, wounds, and food. They're light on answers, but big on food.

Today, we find the disciples gathered together 3 days after Jesus' death. Their friend, teacher, and Lord is dead and in the face of their world being turned upside down, they're paralysed with disbelief. They're frightened, shocked, confused, and lonely. They miss him terribly. Faith, hope, and love are dead. Then, amidst the depth of their despair, Jesus suddenly appears among them. He doesn't judge them, he doesn't rebuke them, he doesn't try to convince them of the truth... he simply offers himself. "See my hands and my feet. Touch me and feel my flesh and bones. Don't be afraid. I'm here. Let's eat!"

You are forgiven if you think that Jesus is mysterious, unpredictable – a little scary even. Because, as he makes clear to the disciples, Jesus can't be known from a distance, on our own private terms. We can't think our way to knowing Jesus through Bible study, or spiritualise him as some otherworldly symbol.

We can't know Jesus by spiritualising him. Jesus is candid, humorous, and very down-to-earth. He presents himself, in the flesh, to his completely freaked out friends and asks them the profound and deeply spiritual question, "Got any snacks?" I have a quiet chuckle to myself when I think of what this text really might be saying to us. What if St Luke is having a dig at us and essentially suggesting that if we get all super-spiritual and float transcendently above this disappointingly broken physical world, we'll miss Jesus all together because that's him over there at the Midway Tavern tucking into broiled fish Sunday. Admittedly, it might be an embarrassing place to have the Lord hanging out, but despite all our attempts to spiritualise, sanitise and polish up Jesus, he just stands there eating broiled fish with his bare hands, holes and all.

As I read this story about how the disciples were startled and terrified and desperately in need of answers and getting nothing but, "Where's the food?", I was taken back to those awkward moments early in my training, when I pretended to be of some use to grieving families sitting by the hospital bed of a dying loved one. And how terrifying it was to think that I was the person people turned to for soothing words of wisdom.

I'd sit with people in their loss. I'd stand by and witness the agonisingly emotional process we politely call grief, and I had no answers. I'd buy them a coffee, make some phone calls, bug the doctors for information, but words of wisdom failed me. I felt like an impostor and wondered what in blue blazes I was doing there.

People wanted answers, or maybe it was just me who wanted answers. Thankfully, I quickly learned that all I had to offer was my presence, a cup of coffee and a ham and cheese toastie. Only later did it dawn on me that that's just what Christianity is.

As many of you know, Lila, a dearly loved member of this congregation, was married right here on December 12 last year and farewelled right here exactly one month later. Many of us prayed fervently for Lila and her family and were devastated when she died. We were simply robbed.

While visiting people in such situations, it's often difficult to find much to say. Sometimes I have to fight the urge to say something even if it's stupid just so I can feel like I've at least said something. Sadly, I hear a lot of nonsense in hospitals and funeral homes. Things like, "God has a plan, we just don't know what it is"; or, "Maybe God took your daughter because he needs another angel in heaven." I know that when I've experienced loss and am feeling so much pain it's like nothing else exists, the last thing I need is a well-meaning but vapid comment like, "When God closes one door he opens another." My deep, but thankfully well-restrained desire is to ask where exactly that door is, so I can shove that well-meaning soul right through it.

Such trivialisation is nonsense spawned from bad religion. The truth is, when you're grieving and someone says something so insipidly optimistic to you, it's usually about them. It's about the fact that they simply can't allow themselves to entertain the finality and pain of death so they shield their fragility by turning into a Hallmark sympathy card.

This isn't a judgement. It's quite common that in moments of grief and loss we're afraid and doubting and we want answers just like the disciples did 3 days after Jesus died. But all anyone can really do is be with us and make casseroles. And when that's all we have to offer it can feel like very little, but the truth is, that's Christianity. Presence and stories and meals and defiantly believing that death is simply not the last word. Think about it. Stripped bare, Christianity is fundamentally material. You can't even get started without a river, a loaf of bread, and a bottle of red wine.

Jesus comes to his followers, then and now, in our grief and loss and doesn't give answers. In our fear and disbelief, he doesn't judge, he doesn't rebuke, he doesn't try to convince us of the truth. He simply offers himself. "Look at my hands and my feet. I'm here. Don't be afraid. Let's eat!" And as the Body of Christ this is what you do for each other as well and for the world God loves so passionately. Your cards and phone calls and Facebook messages and texts and emails to others when they grieve are a tremendous witness to this.

Likewise, your stews and lasagnas and casseroles and soups and smiles and hugs materialise your presence. This is a powerful witness to God who promises to be with us and in those prayers for our grieving brothers and sisters we don't offer any answers, we just bring forth his presence and claim the promise as our own.

Some might think that knowing Jesus means not being fearful and not having doubt, but we definitely can't know Jesus by spiritualising him. Jesus is made known when we gather and tell his story and share food at his table. Jesus is made known when we gather for fellowship as his body, in his name, as we did in the hall on Easter Sunday morning; when we gather in his presence to hear him, to worship him, and to eat and drink him. Jesus is made known when we go to others in their need, because we love them, and we speak about our shared dependence on Jesus and his promise to be with us, always. It's common. It's simple. And, Dear Saints, it definitely is enough. Amen.

And the presence of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.