

Sermon – April 18, 2021 Easter 3, St James

Today we have a Resurrection Gospel. Remember? We are still in the 50 days of Easter, the 50 days celebrating Jesus' resurrection.

You could also say today we have a 'ghost' story if we want to be funny.

Today once again we encounter unbelief! Last week it was 'Doubting Thomas' who became believing Thomas. This week it is the whole group of disciples and their companions who cannot believe what they are seeing! - Jesus standing among them. They are startled and terrified and think they are seeing a ghost! He understands. He asks why they're frightened and why they have doubts in their hearts. Jesus does everything to convince them that they really can believe their eyes. He says 'Look at my hands and my feet...see it is I myself! He invites them to touch him. Then comes a wonderful line...

"41 While in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering...' They were conflicted...filled with joy at what they saw but still not believing. So Jesus asks for fish and eats to show them he really has a working body. Imagine! Then his last effort is opening the scriptures for them. He explained how all that was happening had been predicted and was coming true. But if we're honest, we must admit we understand how hard it was for the group to believe. Jesus himself understands.

Accepting what seems impossible is difficult.

Madeline L'Engle was a lifelong Christian and a writer. She wrote some wonderful children's books. Here is something she wrote long ago. "Sometimes I just know that I am going to come down with an attack of atheism again. It's like the flu. Spiritual flu, I call it. I get ready to endure three or four days of doubts and deep distance from God. Then through the grace of God, I

find myself spiritually well again.” Jesus does everything he can to help them believe as he does with us.

What in the world does this appearance of our Lord mean for us today?

Could it mean this: that there is no way to keep the risen Christ out of any situation? There is no disenchanted heart, there is no broken relationship, there is no angry, hurting or dark place that is off limits for the resurrected Christ. As the poet John Donne wrote long ago, “All occasions invite his mercies, and all times are his seasons.”

I once saw a desk plaque which read, “Bidden or unbidden, God is present.” That is what these post-resurrection stories tell us.

Bidden or unbidden, the spirit of the risen Christ is loose in the world and will be wherever we are whether we ask or not.

Luke writes “He opened their minds,” He opened their minds to understand the scriptures of old and how they had applied to him, to his suffering and death and resurrection. Jesus opened their minds, and then when their minds were opened, he told them repentance and the forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed to all nations and they were the ones to do it. “You shall be my witnesses. I am entrusting the entire enterprise to you.” That was the most astonishing thing he had said to them all day. Who—us? We are the doubters, we are afraid and just simple unsophisticated folk. You are going to leave this all in our hands? Indeed he was.

Here is a little story for you. The day Jesus ascended into heaven he was greeted with gladness by the angels and archangels. “Tell us how you left things on earth,” they ask him, and he told them how he had entrusted his followers with proclaiming the gospel and carrying on the great work that he had begun. The angels were incredulous.

“You can’t mean it,” one of them said. “What if they fail?”
Jesus answered, “I have no other plan.”

So we are sent. The great thing about this story is that it leaves you and me with no place to hide. We are ‘it’. But there are a couple of things missing in this story. First it says nothing about the gift of the Holy Spirit. “I am going to send you what my Father sent me. Stay where you are in the city,” Jesus said. “You do not have to do anything until you have been clothed by the power from on high.” In other words, God will give them what they need to be his witnesses.

The little story misses out this. It is God who is in charge. If every Christian church in world wide collapsed tomorrow, Christ’s kingdom would still come on earth, the kingdom of love and light. Why? Because God is God and God’s great purposes will happen. The final outcome of the story does not rest on us. The outcome rests with God, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. As a friend of mine once said when I was feeling overwhelmed, “Don’t worry. God has already done all the heavy lifting.”

Let us be confident and excited that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. The risen Christ is present bidden or unbidden in every nook and cranny...we are enabled to let that windy Spirit fill us and empower us to reach out in love to all, Amen