

**“Joy, Disbelieving and Still Wondering”**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan – April 14, 2024**

**PLEASE READ:**  
**I John 3:1-7**  
**Luke 24:36b-48**

Can you believe it's been 40 years since the original *Ghostbusters* movie? I'm not a big fan, but there are now five movies, including this year's *Ghostbusters, Frozen Empire*. It shows the fascination people have for all things paranormal, and corny comedy...

In the original *Ghostbusters* movie from 1984, Janine Melnitz, secretary of the firm asks, “Do you believe in UFOs, astral projections, mental telepathy, ESP, clairvoyance, spirit photography, telekinetic movement, full trance mediums, the Loch Ness monster and the theory of Atlantis?” to which Winston Zeddemore answers, “Ah, if there's a steady paycheck in it, I'll believe anything you say.”

There have been some extraordinary events recently, with the earthquake a week ago and then the Monday eclipse. But nothing is as strange as what the disciples experienced in those first weeks of Easter. They saw Jesus and thought he was a ghost. The word in the Greek here is *pneuma*, which literally means breath or spirit, the same word used for the Holy Spirit.

Whatever they thought they were experiencing, they were “startled and terrified!” This is understandable: *dead people are supposed to stay dead!* But Jesus comes to them saying, “Peace be with you.” Then he shows them his wounds. He shows them his hands and feet. Luke goes on to write, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ And they gave him a piece of broiled fish...”

Loaves and fishes ... sound familiar? Perhaps this is where our minds are meant to wander around these Easter scenes of eating bread and fish. God surprisingly provides abundantly for those who hunger and thirst, exceedingly far more than we can imagine...

Luke describes not a group of smug and confident Christians. No, the first Easter community had joy *mixed with disbelief and wondering...* This gives me hope for the church today, because, if we're honest, we have our own disbelief and wondering. We cross our fingers through parts of the Creed. We wonder about an all-powerful and all-loving God and how that squares with tragic loss and wars and violence that we read about all the time.

I have had people come to me and say, I'm not sure I believe. Can I be part of the church? There are communities where they would not be welcome, to be sure. But as Luke describes it, Jesus doesn't seem too worried that his disciples "*were disbelieving and wondering.*" His simple message to them was: "I'm here now! Let's eat!"

It's lost in English, but when Jesus says, "It's me," he uses a Greek form "*Ego Emi*" which harkens back to the revelation of God to Moses. "I am who I am" which for the early Jewish Christians was a powerful connection to the God who entered into history as Liberator and Provider.

This is the key theological point of this story. God is revealed in Jesus not as a God who is indifferent or removed *from* the suffering of our world, but as the God who enters *into* the suffering of our world. The God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a God who suffers *for* and *with* us. And this determines what life and life together in Christ's name is all about. Fred Craddock (former professor of homiletics at Emory) observes,

"The identification between Jesus and the resurrected Christ is critical, not just for theology but also for defining the nature of Christian life. If the Jesus who died belongs to the historical past but the one disciples now follow is the eternal Christ, then the Christian life can take on forms of spirituality without suffering for others, without a cross, without any engagement of issues of life in this world, while expressing devotion to a living, spiritual Christ."<sup>1</sup>

But the Risen Christ is the *Crucified-Risen Christ* who reveals the God of Self-Giving Love. That's why Jesus didn't try first to explain the resurrection reality, he first shows the disciples his scars and calls them into table fellowship...

Jaroslav Pelikan, former Professor of church history at Yale for 40 years was a Greek Orthodox believer. Pelikan notes how the Orthodox Church, in the liturgy of St. John Chrysostam, which goes back to the 4th century, begins the creed, "Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess the Holy Trinity one in essence and undivided..." Did you catch that? "Let us love one another... That we may confess." In other words, love trumps doctrine.

We had the privilege of welcoming some friends from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints join with us on Maundy Thursday. The LDS church doesn't traditionally celebrate Holy Week like we do, so they asked to come and see.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 290.

They also suggested we do a service project together. So, Steph organized a hygiene packet preparation session an hour before the Maundy Thursday service. With the help of our LDS friends, who showed up with their whole families, the packets got finished in like two minutes. So, we were all staring at one another thinking, what are we going to do for the next hour before worship? Then the most amazing thing happened... We read the story of Jesus washing his disciples feet and commanding them to do this for one another, and so we washed one another's feet. Not everyone, but the kids especially were up for it and some of the adults. But it was a beautiful moment...

I thought to myself... even a number of years ago, I wouldn't have dreamed of sharing anything with folks from the LDS church. A good fence makes a good neighbor... There are so many points of doctrine we see differently... But the end of the Maundy Thursday story, of course is the new commandment, that you love one another, and by this people will know that you are my disciples...

Christian community means pursuing more authentic relationships in community. It's about *vulnerability*. The Latin root *vulnus*, means *wound*, by the way... And I have news for you, being vulnerable is typically not going to happen in this sanctuary. It happens when we spend time together as friends and family, when we eat and drink together, when we muster the courage to show our scars, when we learn to pray, serve and love together...

In John's letter, he writes that we are called children of God. He also writes also that we will be like Christ. The Risen Christ commanded his disciples to feed his sheep, or as C.S. Lewis wryly put it in *Letters to Malcolm*, "the charge to Peter was Feed my sheep; not Try experiments on my rats, or...teach my performing dogs new tricks."

Jesus puts it this way: "Thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations... You are witnesses of these things..."

Here the Gospel is reduced to a few simple phrases. Luke summarizes the atoning work of Christ. The anointed one of God is willing to become the victim, not retaliate, but to suffer for love. And the victory of God is the vindication of Christ, this wounded healer... God's infinite mercy and love could not be buried in the tomb, God's creative life-giving power could not be negated by the powers of sin and death. God's yes prevailed over sinful humanity's no. And the message of repentance, our need to change our way of thinking and claim our identity as God's beloved children, is a message to be shared with all people... We don't

celebrate an empty tomb as much as we celebrate the presence of the Crucified-Risen Lord at a table that has room for all!

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are...” It’s an amazing thing to be called the children of God. This good news of the gospel is universal in its scope and scandalously particular in its articulation. The Church today must remember that the blessings of God in Jesus Christ transcend racial, ethnic, gendered, and heteronormative prejudices. It is good news for everyone *without exception*.

Which brings us, finally, to the ethics of Easter... As we are in communion with God and with one another, we can’t help but remember the poor and hungry, the outcasts of our world, those wondering this week whether there will be a cease fire, or those victims of gun violence when we will have more sensible gun laws... Perhaps we need to consider ways in which we can care more for those who disbelieve and still wonder?

I have no idea about the reality of ghosts, but I do know the spirit of God’s love takes on flesh and blood whenever we share loving fellowship. Even the simplest meal can be a reminder of the Easter feast Jesus will serve when the reign of God comes in its fullness. So, as you sit at table later for lunch or dinner, remember, even with your disbelief and wondering, Jesus comes to you in peace.

Perhaps that’s the source of our deepest joy, the good news that all people are welcome at the table with Jesus. And from there we will be encouraged, strengthened and sent forth to bear witness in word and deed to the Crucified-Risen Christ who brings hope and joy, love and justice for all.

*In the name of the One Who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*