



### Jesus Appears to his Disciples

A sermon preached at Second Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday of Easter, April 13, 1997.  
Scripture Lessons: Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. His followers were cast down in gloom. They had come to love Jesus, and at his death they suffered the grief that's always felt when a loved one dies. But there was more here than the normal grief in the time of death. They had followed Jesus with the high hopes that he was the Messiah, the Christ, the one sent from God to free God's people from their oppressors. But when Jesus died, it seemed proof that their hopes had been in vain. A dead Messiah could never set them free.

Some of the women who had followed Jesus went to the tomb to pay their last respects and found the tomb empty and heard the good news that Jesus was not dead but risen. But the men brushed aside the women's testimony as an idle tale. Later, two of the followers were encountered by the risen Jesus on their way to Emmaus and they hurried home to tell the good news to the others. And, as Luke tells us, even as they were telling their story Jesus appeared in their midst.

Inevitably, they were startled and afraid. They took the risen Jesus for a ghost. And so Jesus showed them his hands and his feet. He invited them to touch him and see that he was in fact real. And, to clinch it, Jesus ate before them. At last the followers were ready to believe, and Jesus began to interpret the resurrection as the fulfillment of the Scriptures.

I doubt that any of us today can hear this passage of Scripture without envying the people who had the opportunity to see and feel the reality of the risen Jesus. We tell ourselves, "Oh, if only I could have an experience like that, my doubts would disappear and my faith would be strong and unshakable. But, it's so different today! Faith in the Risen Christ is so much more difficult today. Jesus seems so far away, so long ago, that belief is not easy."

One reason why so many smart, well-educated, urbane men and women find it difficult to trust in the Risen Christ is because we live in a one dimensional world. Many of us have reduced the world to only one dimension. About 35 years ago I wrestled with a modern philosophical classic by French Philosopher, Herbert Marcuse, entitled, One-Dimensional Man. Marcuse described our world as "one dimensional". He charged that most of us in the modern, well-educated, relatively affluent Western world live one-dimensional lives. We think in only one dimension - the dimension of this present life. For many of us, reality is limited to this world, the world we experience with our five senses.

If we can't see, touch, hear, taste or smell it, if we can't make money with it, many modern men and women say that it doesn't exist. We are an age of doubt. We want the proof of our religion in terms that can be confirmed within this one dimension of our life - as though Christ were a thing to be measured and weighed. Some men and women are so afraid of being taken in, ~~like those pathetic victims of the Heaven's Gate cult - so afraid~~

~~of being taken in~~ that we find ourselves believing in less and less until the only thing that we can believe in is ourselves and our immediate needs and wants.

A great British preacher, Donald Soper, once ~~told of a~~ <sup>had a</sup> conversation ~~that he had~~ with a famous Christian scholar, James Hasting, who at the time was in his nineties. Soper asked this venerable man what were the major changes he had seen in his long ministry. Hasting answered, "When I began to preach, the one thing that you could be sure of was that everyone in the congregation was aware of a problem of guilt. But today the only thing that you can be sure of is that everyone before you has a problem of doubt."

It's true. Hardly a week goes by that a church member does not share their doubts with me. I try to assure them that doubt is not unbelief. Doubt is a temptation to throw away one's faith in the Risen Christ. Doubt is, in fact, a sign of faith since I've never heard of anyone doubting what they don't believe. We doubt only those things which we believe. Doubt is not incompatible with a living faith. But doubt is troubling for a Christian, especially when the doubt concerns the very core of the Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus.

That's why the words of the Gospel that come to us today from St. Luke may fill us with envy. Those present on this occasion received concrete proof of seeing and touching the risen Jesus. They saw, they touched, they heard the Risen Christ

A one-dimensional age, such as ours, seeks to overcome its doubts by finding concrete proofs for its religious beliefs

within the one dimension in which it lives. If only we had the opportunity to touch the Risen Christ, to see him with our eyes, to hear him speak to us with our ears. We hear the stories of how accepting Christ has brought material wealth to believers, miraculously cured illnesses, and so on. We grab hold of such stories because they seem to be affirming the truth of Christianity within that one dimension of experience that we accept as being really real; what we can touch and see.

At first sight, today's Gospel lesson seems to confirm a one-dimensional world. Jesus gave his followers the concrete proof of his resurrection in terms of seeing and touching. But ~~we~~ <sup>what</sup> ~~don't believe~~ the intention <sup>writes is not</sup> of St. Luke ~~was~~ to encourage us to seek concrete proof for our faith in the Risen Christ. I think Luke tells us this story for two <sup>other</sup> reasons.

First, Luke wants to tell us what the earliest Christians believed about the Risen Christ. The Risen Christ was not a ghost. A ghost is a dead person whose spirit, somehow survives and flits around frightening people or, perhaps, helping them like Casper, the friendly ghost. But the Risen Christ says, "A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." When the early Christians encountered the Risen Christ they were absolutely certain that they were not encountering a dead person, a ghost. They were absolutely convinced that they were encountering someone full of life, so full of life that his life spilled over and enlivened them and gave them new life. Christians do not believe Jesus simply survived death.

Christians believe that Jesus conquered death by his death and resurrection.

Secondly, Luke wants to tell us how the earliest Christians came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus. <sup>so that we also may come to trust,</sup> The way we ~~become~~ <sup>to faith in</sup> Christians today is a lot like the way those earliest Christians came to believe in the Risen Christ. Luke gives us spiritual direction as to how we can come to believe in the Risen Christ and begin to live a multi-dimensional rather than a one-dimensional life.

How do we come to trust that Jesus is risen from the dead? First, Christian faith in the Risen Christ nearly always arises within the Christian community. "Jesus stood among them", Luke writes. Those early Christians came to believe in the reality of the resurrection within a Christian community. And today, experience shows that New members who become involved in a Sunday School class, a choir, a mission project; or who serve regularly as greeters, ushers or in some other way are involved in Christian community usually stay involved and find their faith in the Risen Christ strengthened.

Secondly, Christians find an extremely close connection between reading and discussing the Scriptures and faith in the Risen Christ. The Risen Christ "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." When men and women read and study the Scriptures in large groups in worship or in small groups, in the home or Sunday school class, skeptical they often come to experience another dimension of life. They come to believe in the Risen Christ.

Thirdly, Luke points out that faith in the Risen Christ is closely related to eating and drinking together. Time after time we read in the resurrection accounts that it was while men and women were eating and drinking that they suddenly became aware of the Risen Christ. Christians who find time to eat and drink together on a regular basis - such as at a Nomad dinner - oddly enough often find their faith in the Risen Christ strengthened.

In this Easter season which lasts fifty days the minds of Christians are called back to the report that Jesus arose from the dead. Our doubting age has trouble with such a story. In our one-dimensional world many of us are certain that dead people don't return. But as we gather regularly as a Christian community and as our lives become more connected to one another as men and women who are committed to one another we will surely experience that the Risen Lord is standing among us.

Let us pray: O God, your Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread. Open the eyes of our faith, that we may see him in his redeeming work; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.