

3 Easter April 18, 2021.
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...in joy and disbelieving...
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Sometimes it can be extremely difficult to wrap our heads around something, especially a new idea, discovery, or a perspective that challenges a long held cultural assumption and leads to significant change. History shows me this struggle, especially how some people reacted- and some struggle to this very day - with the civil rights movement and the Equal Rights Amendment. Some people just couldn't imagine a world where people of color and women would be given the same rights, pay, and opportunities as white men, perhaps because they fear a loss such change brings.

The pandemic has posed a similar challenge to Americans where public health mandates are seen by some as a loss of freedoms instead of a way of love and responsibility to care for our neighbors. When the pandemic started, I struggled to understand it and couldn't imagine how we were going to adapt our ministry of presence in a situation where gathering in groups was one of the riskiest ways of getting or spreading a virus that does not discriminate and has taken the lives of over 560,000 Americans, including a friend of mine, and can leave survivors with long lasting side effects.

What helped me turn from struggling to understand to figuring out how to adapt was the ingenuity, grit, and generosity of my alma mater, Northland College, a small private liberal arts/environmental college in Northern Wisconsin. Northland College professors worked together to create their first ever on-line class and made it about the COVID-19 pandemic - exploring the pandemic from every perspective they could: history, biology, epidemiology, economics, mathematics, even spirituality, art, music, and literature. They offered this May-term class to alum like me and the general public for free. Over 200 of us participated and this class that not only helped people like me figure out how we are going to get through this pandemic, it helped invigorate Northland College as donations poured in, alumni reconnected, and thanks to some national attention, new students were attracted to the college.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned from the class was it takes time and intention to go from feeling like the world you had always known has been interrupted, shaken up, and perhaps exposed as being unjust or totally different than you had assumed or believed to being able to adapt to and function in the new. This lesson is the same one we see the Risen Jesus offering to his disciples in our Gospel today as they struggled to wrap their heads around the resurrection life in their midst.

While the account of the Risen Jesus standing in the midst of his followers might sound like a rerun for those of you keeping up with the Sunday readings and sermons, today's reading comes from a different Gospel than last Sunday. Today we are in the Gospel According to Luke. Since we are still in the Season of Easter - remember for the Church Year Easter is not a day, it is a season of fifty days - we can expect to read many different accounts of the resurrection and are given time to reflect on the Risen Jesus and the new creation he brings. It's time we need, because as the resurrection of Jesus challenges not only the disciples, but all of us to imagine a reality different than the one of sin: the scarcity, greed, and corruption we all unfortunately know too well.

That is how today's Gospel begins, with the Risen Jesus appearing to his disciples who can't seem to find a way to make sense of his presence and the Risen Christ challenging their assumptions of how he could be there. The author of Luke's Gospel tells us the disciples were overwhelmed with joy at seeing the Risen Jesus and at the same time could not believe what they were seeing. Together joy and disbelief created a sense of wonderment for the disciples, which sounds like a poetic way of saying, they just couldn't wrap their heads around what was happening, let alone begin to understand what the presence of the Risen Jesus means.

Jesus began by addressing their wonderment by showing he is not a ghost, nor a collective hallucination born out of overwhelming grief. His new corporal body has solidity, has substance. Despite being able to manifest without opening doors, the Risen Jesus is not ethereal, he has substantial flesh and bone that carries the scars of his crucifixion. And, unlike what we read in John's Gospel last week, the Risen Jesus seems to have an appetite, or at least the ability to eat food as he enjoyed the church's first ever fish fry, thus beginning a tradition the church has been happy to continue - especially in my home state of Wisconsin- to this very day.

Today we might wonder why it was so important for the Risen Jesus to prove his reality, the corporal nature of his resurrection. There has to be more to it than establishing church dinners and fish fries. And there is. By establishing the reality of the resurrection in this world, the Risen Jesus is revealing the truth that the Kingdom of Heaven isn't an imagined afterlife; it is very real, so much so it can and does manifest in this world. Nothing, not the selfishness of sin, not injustice, not even death, can prevent God's Kingdom of love from happening here on earth.

The manifestation of God's Kingdom on earth isn't just something we followers of Jesus wait for. In today's Gospel the Risen Jesus tells his followers that is their primary mission: to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to the world. Notice the Risen Jesus does not tell his followers to start specific ministries based on charity or education- there is no prescription for feeding ministries, aid programs, or Bible studies - but to go out and embody resurrection life through proclaiming repentance and forgiveness.

This does not mean we should abandon feeding ministries or helping people. It means whatever ministries we choose to do, whether it's the free weekly meal we offered before the pandemic or the non-perishable food pantry we have now, or the free masks we are giving away on our Tree of Giving, or the TARDIS from the BBC television series *Doctor Who* that occasionally shows up on the church lawn, the blessing of the first day of classes at OU by giving away coffee and donuts, Ashes-to-Go on Ash Wednesday, opening our chapel to the public before the pandemic and the outdoor votive prayer hill we have now, our coffee shop ministry with its pay-it-forward model, thrift store, the COVID -19 memorial, and all our ministries and worship services need to be for us an intentional way of expressing and embodying repentance - turning from self-centeredness toward God- and forgiveness in what we both do and say. That is why it was so important that we adapted the ministries we could to the mandates and guidelines required during the pandemic, so that we continue to embody God's Kingdom of love, healing, hope, repentance and forgiveness here on our little patch of earth as best we can at the moment.

You see, there are so many people in the world who have not experienced the Love of God. There seem to be plenty of folks who think of God as an angry judge eager to punish, or folks who see too little proof to accept God exists, or don't like the idea of a world where forgiveness and love and generosity and mercy can make room for all people to live together without fear. Maybe you can relate or empathize or maybe you feel the same way. It can be difficult to wrap our heads around the truth that God is love, and this love is stronger than anything we may be all too familiar -- greed, injustice, racism, sexism, ageism, elitism, violence, pain and suffering, even death. This love is so strong it manifests itself in forgiveness, in healing, in turning away from being centered on self toward the Love that is God. The same love that appeared in the Risen Jesus made of flesh and blood, bearing the marks of crucifixion, and snacking on fish perfectly at home in the world he loves.

Even though it can be hard to wrap our minds around, this love of God is so strong it needs to be proclaimed and shared. Because it can help us learn to let go of what we need to, grieve the loss, and follow that love into the world and help the world see - as the prayer in the prayer book says- what was cast down is being raised up, what was old is being made new, that loss is not an ending, but a step toward God's Kingdom present here on earth. And what is even more wonderful, God, who is love, loves you, loves us. So, we can take those steps through loss and into God's new creation together in joy and disbelieving and wonder to embody that love in the world. Alleluia.