

“Inside the Story”  
Rev. Susan M. Prichard  
April 26, 2009  
Luke 24: 36b-48

“There was a group of folks in first century Palestine who came to know the presence of God among them through the life of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. How they came to that point is interesting, but not fundamentally relevant. The fundamental reality is that they knew the reality of God among them through their experience of Jesus. And if we allow ourselves to believe, we too will know that reality.” (Rumors, p.2) Listen for and hear God’s word to us in these words of scripture.

Luke 24: 36b-48

How would you describe the real presence of Christ in your life? How’s that for a question to get you started on Sunday morning? However, that was the real question for the disciples and their first century followers.

Those early Christians didn’t have anything actually written by Jesus. They didn’t have a video of him teaching the masses. There was no DNA evidence of the resurrection. And while, they did have individuals and groups who reported to seeing the risen Jesus, there were no polygraphs to prove that it wasn’t just a mass hallucination.

The story this morning, takes place immediately after the story of the two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus on Easter evening and their experience with the man who turned out to be Jesus. Once again, in this story, Jesus tries to quell their fears and demonstrate his physical nature. In the first story he eats supper with them. In this one, he asks for fish to eat. Jesus tries to make them comfortable as he continues to share his wisdom and mission plans.

It was those disciples, whose testimony built the church. It was their witness that brought others to Christ.

Noted preacher William Wilimon says: “Resurrection faith is based upon considerably more than the empty tomb. It is based primarily on experience by the followers of Jesus of the presence of Christ. He appears to his followers first because they are the ones best able to recognize that the one who stands before them is none other than the crucified one whom they had known and followed.”(Pulpit Resource, p.26)

But the story they shared was so extraordinary that many refused to believe. What was it about them? What was it about their testimony, that drew others in, rather than scaring people away?

I don’t know if I’ve shared this story with you or not, but it’s a great story. Several years ago, Tony Campolo was speaking to a large crowd gathered in a huge auditorium. He asked the crowd, “How many of you first heard about the love of God and Jesus Christ because you listened to a televangelist?” In that whole auditorium one

person raised his hand. And Tony said, “Isn’t this wonderful, ladies and gentlemen. Millions of dollars have been spent on television ministries and it’s worked. He’s here.” Then he said, “How many of you first heard about the love of God and Jesus Christ because some person—a parent, grandparent, Sunday School teacher, minister—how many of you first learned about the love of God and Jesus because someone took the time to share their relationship with you?” Nearly everyone in the auditorium raised their hands.

We come to believe because someone shared their personal experience with us. And, because of their “testimony” or “witness”, both dodgy words for us mainline Congregationalists, we are able to see and recognize the risen Christ when he appears to us.

“Faith in the risen Christ is not an achievement. It is a gift. It is not a matter of resolving an intellectual dilemma; it is a matter of his loving us enough to reveal himself to us. It’s not the words of Jesus that we need to get right; it is his living presence that we need to experience. If Jesus did not come and stand among us, if he did not speak to us and reassure us, there would be no believing, no worship, no faith.

“But Jesus has. And that’s the major reason why you and I are here today, why, when hymns of our faith are sung, you are able to join in with full-throated joy. Christ has come to you. It is not only that he has risen, but that he has risen for you. You have come here because he came to you.” (Pulpit Resource, p.27)

We, too, have a responsibility for passing on the faith. We have not been given this gift to hoard and keep just to ourselves. We are called to share this gift with others. And, one of the primary ways we do this is through the church with a capital C and the church with a small c. When we are faithful stewards of our time, talent and treasure, we share what we have so that others may be blessed. When we share our time and talents: children are taught, homes are restored, music is sung, phones are answered, newsletters are mailed, meals are made. When we share our treasure: people are clothed, fed, housed, cured, inoculated, employed, blessed.

When the disciples shared similar wonderful things happened, and the Church of Jesus Christ was born. That church is the place where people learn about God, people are welcomed, lives are transformed and miracles continue to happen on a regular basis.

One Sunday, Rev. Willimon said to his congregation: “We were discussing the need for more evangelism in our congregation, the need to attract new members to our church.

“Why do you come to this church?” I asked.

“Some said that they enjoyed the fellowship. One said that she loved the music. Thank goodness someone mentioned the good preaching!

“Then Mary said, “I keep coming back, have done so for twenty years, because, of all places in my life, it is this place that I experience most vividly the presence of Christ. I have hardly ever come here without feeling, at some point in the service, or in conversations before and after, that Jesus is here.”

“That seemed to me about the best reason to be in church after Easter.” (Pulpit Resource, p.28)

Friends, we are beginning the process of moving into the church we will be in the future. We cannot keep looking over our shoulders to the past, to the things that distracted us from our true mission. We cannot just sit around waiting for others to come back to the church, or for new ones to replace them. We must, instead, focus on our present and look to our future—the one Jesus has planned for us. As Christians we are called to be prepared and to be ready to take on whatever presents itself to us. There is so much going on right now. We are putting our physical and spiritual houses in order.

Once we believe, our actions are needed more than our words. We need to live out the gospel message, both here and in the outside world. Discipleship doesn't require degrees or special education. Discipleship requires integrity, determination, and the desire to share the love of God and Jesus with others. This we all can do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.