

## Sermon: Total Resurrection

Lesson: Acts 3: 12-20

Lesson: I John 3: 1-7

Lesson: Luke 24: 36b-49

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Here we have yet another post-resurrection story.

Those of you who were here last Sunday might be wondering if I have mixed up the lectionary readings for the Gospel with last Sunday's readings. It seems strange that having had John's version of the post-resurrection visit by Jesus to the disciples last Sunday, that we would have Luke's version this Sunday. Isn't the lectionary supposed to spread this out over three years?

Rest assured, my time away has not totally confused me. From time to time, we are asked by the lectionary to look at similar passages one week after the next. The idea is to have us come to fuller understanding of the Gospel, through the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle variations in the telling of these events.

There is indeed much that is similar between the two accounts. In both John and Luke, the disciples are afraid. Jesus shows his hands and feet in both stories as evidence of who he is. Doubt occurs in both – John localizes doubt in the person of Thomas; Luke indicates that all, or at least most, of those present were filled with doubt, even when they were rejoicing. In both passages Jesus offers the Holy Spirit – in John he breathes it upon the disciples; in Luke Jesus promises them that the Spirit will be given, power from on high, in due time. In both stories, it is significant that Jesus stands among the disciples – the risen Christ in the midst of those who had been sorrowing and confused.

Yet with all these similarities, there are two significant differences in emphasis. The overall message is the same, but the emphases vary slightly. We need to hear both to fully understand the power of the resurrection.

In John, although Jesus shows his hands and side, the emphasis is on his divinity. Thomas proclaims, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus gives the disciples the instruction, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;” – this is the same authority which the Pharisees condemned Jesus as blasphemous when he told someone that their sins were forgiven. How much more so would they consider this passing along of the authority as an example of claiming divinity.

In Luke, while acknowledging the divine, the emphasis is on Jesus’ *humanity*. Jesus not only shows the disciples his hands and feet, he points out that ghosts do not have flesh and bones, and he asks for and receives something to eat. Theologian N.T. Wright points out that this resurrection story makes it clear that the body has been resurrected, not just the spirit. Dr. Wright indicates that this affirms the belovedness of the creation. The body is not an evil thing to be cast off; the creation is not a limitation to be endured. A whole new creation has begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, body, mind, and spirit. (Wright, Surprised by Hope).

The second variation in emphasis is close to the first. Although John records that Jesus told the disciples that he was sending them out, the emphasis in the John passage is on belief, “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. In Luke, though Jesus is clearly intent that the disciples should believe, the emphasis is on witness, “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.”

It is this inward and outward, humanity/divinity, belief/witness balance, achieved by looking at both passages, which is necessary for us to respond to the amazing good news of

Jesus' resurrection. Clearly we cannot convincingly proclaim what we do not know, what we do not believe. What may not be equally as obvious, however, is that we cannot keep silent, cannot be inactive, once we come to believe. Yet this also is true; this also is the Gospel. The Gospel which touches us personally, also compels us to respond communally in a new way.

As theologian Joseph Small would say: We are called to be witnesses to a resurrection, not a resuscitation, a new creation not just more of the same. We are called to be witnesses to a resurrection of the body, as well as the spirit. We are called to be witnesses to God's love for us and all creation, to look with clear eyes upon the sinfulness of ourselves and of others, to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. And we are called to do all this in the midst of our own vulnerability, our own need, our own hunger.

So how do we do this? We do this by engaging with the world in the way that Jesus engages his disciples. Jesus goes where his disciples are. He meets them in their need. Speaks to them words of reassurance and hope and truth. Interprets the Scriptures to them. Empowers them. Jesus lets them know that he understands their broken humanity, yet holds a vision for them which is new life, new creation.

This engagement of the world is more than just doing what is right and good. Christian faith, the Christian life, is more than being kind, doing good works, giving money to charities, or even using our time and energies for good programs and projects. While a full Christian life will undoubtedly include these things, many non-Christians are also known for their good works. The difference is not in the work being done, nor even necessarily in the outcomes that result. The difference comes in the why, the how, and the way in which we engage our efforts as being ministries done in the name and spirit of Christ.

Christianity is not just one way in which we all work together to move the world along in

a progressively better way. Christianity, focusing on the concurrent realities of the goodness of God's creation, the pervasive presence of evil, and the overwhelming power of God's grace in redemption, offers a radically new understanding of how we are called to approach all of our life, including all that we do which that benefits our community or others.

This is sometimes difficult for us to understand. When the Mission Committee was discussing the possibility of praying for the caring ministries which our congregation carries on through its members, but which are not under the aegis of GPC, I raised the thought that not all good works are ministries. While true, I was at a loss to explain clearly what I meant.

As I reflected later, I focused on two organizations with whom I am involved: the ADA, American Diabetes Association, and the PDA, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. I easily saw PDA as a ministry. Just as easily I felt that ADA was not a ministry, but was something with which I was involved for self-interested reasons. Yet even as I considered this, I found I was very uncomfortable with that distinction.

I have long preached that Christians are to open ourselves to Christ's leading in all aspects of our lives: work, family, play, community service, church. So why should I make a distinction among the organizations with whom I work. Should not the same Spirit which leads to work with Disaster Assistance also guide my work in other places? Would my work with the ADA, or the school groups, or any other group be different if I see it as a ministry, if I consciously and intentionally engage with it as a servant of Christ whether or not I use the name of Christ in it? I believe it would. I believe not only the work would change, but so would I. We are called to live our lives not as if the good we do is something for which the world ought to thank us, but as something we do in response to the gracious love of God in Jesus Christ. This change in the expectation of gratitude profoundly changes us and what we do.

I invite you to join me in a spiritual adventure. Some of you may already be way ahead of the rest of us in this challenge, but I think it might be interesting to you as well. Start each day hearing Christ say to you, “Peace be with you.” Take a moment each morning to contemplate the extraordinary vision of Christ, risen from the dead, eating fish, reaffirming that in his risen state he still is human, is still part of a beloved creation, even while still fully divine. Put your hand into the nail-pierced hand of Jesus the Christ, so that he can lead you through your schedule for that day. Know that his nail-pierced feet will walk alongside you, helping to steady you when you stumble or fall. See his scarred yet radiant face, the face of the new creation, in the face of each person you meet – greet them as you would him, even if they greet you as if you were a god, especially if they greet you as if you were dirt. Remember, too, that the risen Christ abides in you, that you are beloved, that you are forgiven, that you are called to new life – that Christ comes to stand beside you wherever you are.

Let us enter each activity, whether it is work or play, enjoyable or drudgery, as an opportunity to minister in the spirit of Christ: to proclaim, by our actions as well as our words, repentance and forgiveness of sins. By our actions, through our love, with both humility and confidence in the new creation in Christ, let us bear witness to God’s grace in strange and remarkable ways. The Risen Christ changes the world into a new creation. The Risen Christ changes you and me. Let us proclaim this good news! AMEN.

(N.T. Wright’s book, Surprised by Hope, provides inspiration for several thoughts in this sermon in addition to the one point noted. Since the thoughts were spread throughout the book, and not directly attributable to particular sentences in my sermon, they were not easy to footnote. I acknowledge my debt to him at this point.)