

Sermon Easter 3 Year B 2018
Acts 3:12-19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48
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It's hard to hear the lesson from the Book of Acts this morning and not ask, is this the same Peter, the disciple that we know from the gospels? Is this the same Peter who tried to suppress Jesus' description of his coming death and caused Jesus to say, "Get behind me Satan?" Was this the same Peter who on three separate occasions after Jesus' arrest denied that he even knew Jesus? Yes, as hard as this seems, this is the same Peter. Faith has the power to transform our lives. The transformation of the disciple, Peter, is a particularly vivid example.

What precedes Peter's speech in the lesson this morning was a miracle that he and John performed at the gate of the temple. It seems that a certain person who had been lame from birth was carried by friends to beg each day at the gate. One day as Peter and John approached the gate, the man asked them for money. Whereupon Peter looked at him intently and said, "Look at us. I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." The man did just that and then clung to Peter and John and a crowd gathered. So Peter was addressing this crowd of onlookers when he gave his powerful testimony.

To know the power of the resurrected Christ is to be transformed. Peter and the other disciples were now empowered for mission. So that as the collect

this morning said, the eyes of the disciples' faith had been opened and they were never the same.

Today's lesson from the Gospel of Luke comes from the end, from chapter 24. The events recalled in this 24th chapter led to Luke's sequel, the Book of Acts.

The disciples, as they were last Sunday, were locked in a room, distraught, fearful and anxious. Conflicting stories had been coming in all day. No doubt the disciples and other followers were sharing the stories that were spreading through the group. When suddenly into the room stepped Jesus, offering the familiar greeting that we heard from John's gospel last Sunday. "Peace be with you." Rather than hearing that as the gentle and reassuring greeting that we hear as the story is read, the disciples were, "Startled and terrified." In their shame and fear, they thought they were seeing a ghost. If any of us encountered someone who had died, we too would believe them a ghost.

But Jesus seemed surprised that they were frightened. Perhaps he thought that he had prepared them adequately for this event. Hadn't he told them over and over that the Son of Man must suffer and die and on the third day be raised from the dead? But clearly resurrection isn't something that one can prepare for.

So once again, Jesus invited the disciples to touch him. To see that he had a physical body. This was not an apparition. Touch me and see. Touch me and come to know. You have to love Luke for his honesty and story telling ability. Luke reports, "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." It seems odd that they should be filled with joy and yet disbelieving at the same time. Scholars and the REB say, "for it seemed too good to be true." That is the kind of great joy that seems simply unbelievable even when staring us in the

face. Seeing, hearing, and touching were all needed to bring the disciples to a consensus. Even seeing and touching there was still doubt and question.

Jesus knew that the disciples needed more if they were to believe. So Jesus asked for something to eat. For ghosts don't eat and drink.

It seems like Jesus is willing to do what it takes to make the reality of his presence clear to the disciples. He does this because there is a mission to be done. Jesus describes that mission: "That repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations." "You are witnesses of these things." Witnesses were important. And thus 40 days of resurrection appearances set the record straight. These appearances empowered the church. All were witnesses yet not everyone saw or interpreted the events the same. How many of us still struggle at times trying to comprehend what resurrection means?

Jesus knew that resurrection was a difficult concept to come to terms with. So, Jesus understands our struggles as well. And that's ok. Faith is after all, a gift of grace. We trust the promises of Jesus who said that he would never leave us alone. God's Spirit accompanies us always.

God's presence in our lives begins in the waters of baptism. At baptism, the Holy Spirit comes in a powerful way. We are marked as Christ's own forever. And mysteriously, we become the body of Christ for the world around us.

Then we gather weekly for the celebration of the Eucharist. Our worship each Sunday centers on the breaking of the bread. Here at this table we gather and celebrate together, knowing that we are forgiven and that we are welcomed. As broken and sinful as we are, we are welcomed. Welcomed to come and

receive the body of Christ. To be fed the bread of heaven, and the cup of salvation. Over the course of our lives, we are nurtured on the Eucharist. And in that mystical process of feeding on and receiving Jesus, we become who we are, the body of Christ.

As the body of Christ, our task is to be able to share the story, like Peter in the Acts lesson this morning. To be the rock that Jesus can build his Church upon. We are to proclaim the risen Christ in our lives. And we are to offer forgiveness in Jesus' name. We are the hands and feet of Jesus active in the world.

It took me a while to come to understand that this is the task of the church. And it took me even longer to become clear about just who is the church. I came to understand this during a sermon given by an interim priest.

The preacher led the congregation on by saying some of the things that people say about the church. About how the church can be disappointing at times. How it can be too caught up in the social gospel or not caught up enough. How it is not addressing the needs of older folks or how it was not addressing the needs of young families. Or seem to be only focused upon sexuality or discrimination or politics. Or spoke too much to power or not enough about power. You get the point. We were all starting to feel a little disgruntled as well.

Then he caught me up short by saying, "Look around the sanctuary." And we all did. We looked around the church and then he said. "Well here it is, this is the church." There is no grand church to accomplish all that God intends or the things that we hope might happen. There is only us. We are the church, he

said. If it is to be done, it must be done here and done by us. Well, I was flabbergasted. I had assumed that the church was some sort of institution beyond my local congregation. Powerful people doing powerful things. But the more I reflected upon what was said, it occurred to me that he was right. We were the group of disciples in that place at that time. We were the church and if something was to be done or was going to happen we were the folks to accomplish the task.

That sermon had two effects on me. First, I stopped complaining about “the church” quite so much. I stopped because I realized that I was really complaining about myself and my friends.

Second, it made me more committed to the gospel and to the gathered community that we call church. I realized that God was depending on me. I had the eyes of my faith opened.

So too, my friends, there is only us. The people that God has called into St. John’s. We are the people that God has to do God’s work. To love our neighbors, to forgive those who have wronged us, and to ask forgiveness of those whom we have wronged.

We are the Church. The church was born out of confusion and mystery. Born out of fear and amazement. Born out of disbelieving and still wondering. And the same is true today. We cannot wait until everyone believes or comes to faith. God you see is depending on us as inadequate as we might feel. God is looking to us. Hoping that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name. This is our story to share, that God’s love in Jesus has triumphed over death and that love reaches into our hearts, into our lives, calling

us forth. Calling us to share the love that we have come to know in Jesus with those who have not yet experienced this.

This work of mission begins here in the Church. Like the apostle Peter, coming to know the power of the resurrected Jesus transforms us. The eyes of our faith are opened and then we are turned loose to carry the good news of God in Christ to others.

St. Augustine used to conclude services of the Eucharist with this exhortation. He would say, “You are the body of Christ. That is in you and through you the work of the Incarnation continues. Like the bread of the Eucharist, your lives are to be taken, they are to be blessed, they are to be broken and given away. That your life may be a vehicle of the eternal love of God.”