

Easter 3B: Luke 24.36b-48

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No matter how many times your statistics teacher told you that correlation is not causation, our minds are made to make connections between things, are they not? Yes, it is an important life skill to note the effect large quantities of late night Indian food has on one's digestive system, but sometimes humans can move too quickly to the assumption that *this* must be the cause of *that*.

Last week a headline in *The Onion* read, "Biden Surges In Polls After Convincing Terrified Voters He Is Causing Eclipse." The President is quoted in the article as saying, "If I can make the sun disappear, imagine what I could do to your harvests should I not receive your support in November." *The Onion* is a satirical news source, in case you haven't made that connection quite yet. But the joke rests on the well established truth that human history is filled with wrong assumptions about the significance of events. Future generations are bound to find some of our assumptions about the way things are pretty laughable as well. Which is why the wisest ones among us will often refrain from resolving the contradictions they experience in life with neat explanations too quickly. Wise interpreters of scripture will often do the same, we're told.

We've jumped from the upper room in John's gospel last Sunday over to Luke for this week's post Easter appearance. Our reading begins with the disciples talking. They were talking about what just happened on the road to Emmaus. Two of them had carried on a conversation with a stranger as they walked, telling him all that had happened in Jerusalem over the past few days. The man heard them out. And then he took them through the great stories of the Hebrew Bible. It wasn't until they sat down to eat, and the man disappeared, that they realized it had been Jesus. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road," they said, "while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Then the two ran back to tell their friends, and the scene we read today takes place.

Here Jesus appears again, mysteriously, out of nowhere. To prove his identity to this group, he asks them to touch and see that he is flesh and blood. He shows them his hands and his feet. And then, for his final trick, he eats a fish to prove he is a body, not a ghost.

Sigmund Freud once told a little story about a man who loaned a kettle to his neighbor. When he got it back, it was damaged. But the neighbor defended himself, saying that, first of all, he had returned the kettle in perfect condition. Secondly, the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it. And thirdly, he'd never borrowed a kettle from the man at all. Any one of these defenses would be plausible, of course. But taken together, they don't make much sense.

Something similar seems to be happening as the post resurrection appearances of Jesus accumulate. This resurrected form seemed strange and different enough not to be recognizable even by close friends. OK. Maybe we can buy that. Some vague spiritual presence accompanied Jesus' followers after his death.

But then the gospel writer takes great care to tell us there was nothing vague or ghostly about the resurrected Christ at all. Feet and hands are exhibit one. Jesus takes a bite of broiled fish to seal the deal.

If this was a bodily appearance in which even hands and feet were recognizable, why can't people seem to recognize his face? If these details can make a kind of sense independently, they make a lot less sense when taken together.

Now, this is the point in a sermon where the preacher is expected to iron out the inconsistencies with some interpretive calisthenics. Point out a Greek verb tense here, maybe a first century cultural norm there, and voila! The paradoxes vanish like Jesus from that dinner table in Emmaus.

But what if we're not meant to do this ironing out of contradiction? What if we're meant to hear that the kettle was returned intact, that it had a hole in it when borrowed, and that it was never borrowed at all? Or, put another way, what if the fish Jesus ate was a red herring, so to speak, another unsettling contradiction rather than a proof that settles everything? Maybe this resurrection was never meant to be a solvable mystery at all. Maybe it was never meant to be understood as one more provable fact.

And maybe the proof those first witnesses really got was in the burning of their hearts. What this story seems to be taking great pains to tell us is that whatever these people experienced, it did not fit into the readymade categories our minds are used to sorting experiences into. And maybe this is OK. Because whatever those people actually saw is not what got passed on to us. The next few verses in Luke have this resurrected Jesus withdrawing up into heaven. Another mystery for another day. But it reminds us that whatever they saw or spoke to or touched or wondered at, what's been passed on to us is not that. We're not the eye witnesses of these events. What we've received is the community they started to form as their burning hearts opened up to something new that day. What's been passed on to us is not a proof or an explanation, but the result of their joyful conviction that God was still among them. That love is indeed stronger than the grave.

St. Anselm said "I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand." Which means that the faith comes first. Anselm didn't teach a blind acceptance of religious dogma. He put all of his intellect to work in his faith. But he believed that we need to let ourselves experience the world before we start explaining it. We need to open ourselves to the experience of God and trust that experience first before we set off to describe the God we think might make sense to us. And Anselm's idea might be useful to us. Because what a sad, small life it is, if we limit our future to the mysteries we've already solved.

Sometimes it's the certainty that no real mystery remains in our lives, the certainty that we've already made enough sense of our world, that keeps us from seeing the strange, wonderful, grace-filled future that's unfolding before us. And maybe this is why the grace of the resurrection makes its way all the way to us through stories like these.

Those first disciples saw something that didn't fit the categories they were used to using to make sense of their world. Categories like life and death and bodies and ghosts. But they opened themselves to this experience of God before they could explain it. And they passed it on, unexplained, to us. Probably because all the explanations they could manage were just too small.

What formed that first community of resurrection wasn't a fact, but an encounter. An experience that they shared, even if they didn't comprehend it. And what we're told is that forgiveness and repentance, life-giving breaks in the cruel ways people thought things just had to be, followed these first witnesses wherever they went, spreading eventually to all the nations of the earth, including this one where they reached even the likes of you and me.

So maybe they are passing on to us a plea to not to write bold headlines about why things are as they are too soon. Maybe they are telling us to not rule out too soon experiences and possibilities in our world and even in ourselves that don't quite fit our reasonable explanations.

For sometimes the inexplicable paradox is the person standing in front of you. Maybe the irreconcilable facts of Jesus's resurrection shouldn't surprise us so much when we remember how he reached out to people who had been excluded because they made their living collecting

taxes or by prostitution. Jesus broke bread with such people, insisting to the rest of us that there was more to their stories than their scandalous resumes. How many times did he reach out and touch someone whose body was deemed untouchable because of his disability or illness, or speak to someone the world ignored because of her gender or her race or her religion? “There is more to this person than your explanations allow for,” he said with the whole of his life. If something has to go, let it be your reasoned certainty, not her. Not him.

Sometimes we just don’t get tidy proofs. Especially about what matters most to our lives, like love and joy and meaning and friendship. And when the categories and strategies we used to make sense in the past begin to break down, maybe faith is about refusing to shut down and to stay open. For the Resurrection reminds us that God is present already, to strange other lives, and even to the future, in ways that are not our own. In ways that we may not understand. But in ways that, if we open ourselves to them, we too will see and touch and hear, perhaps as we turn to each other in those uncertain times and say, “It doesn’t all make sense just yet, but weren’t our hearts burning within us just then?”