

Repentance and Forgiveness

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus was the talk of the town! Everyone wondered what the events in Jerusalem meant. What were they to make of the disaster of that Friday and the mystery of that Sunday? And now rumors abounded that Jesus was alive.

The disciples and others gathered in Jerusalem had the job of sorting out fact from fiction: What happened? Who could be believed? What testimony was credible? What was next? Answering these questions was and still is a daunting task for this Third Sunday of Easter in the Year of Lord 2015.

The disciples and others gathered in Jerusalem were immersed in chaos and confusion—fear, frustration, guilt, grief, doubt, anxiety, suspicion, distrust, restlessness, despondency, and terror. Their leader was dead, and his bloody and wounded body missing. In the midst of their escalating alarm, out of nowhere, Jesus himself appeared!

Jesus showed up, providing words of comfort, assurance, and chastisement. "Peace be with you" was followed by "Why are you freaking out?" As he had done so many times, Jesus asked what was for dinner! It was the same Jesus, yet different—once dead but now alive, caring yet still fussing about their lack of faith

and their unpreparedness. Jesus acted as if nothing had happened—he seemed normal, natural, just what they had come to expect.

Yet the appearance of Jesus after his cry of abandonment, the giving up of his spirit, and being laid in a tomb was anything but normal, natural, or expected. Earthly, human power had triumphed over him. The high priest, the scribes, the elders, the skeptics, and the curious had all condemned Jesus as a scoundrel and blasphemer—guilty as charged! The governor, Pontius Pilot, the Roman soldiers, interested bystanders, and criminals had condemned Jesus as a traitor and rebel—guilty as charged! Even God seemed to confirm the verdict when Jesus called out “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me,” with no rescuing angels, no last minute acquittal, no surprise witnesses to change the verdict, like on Perry Mason—guilty as charged! According to the law of the day, Jesus got what he deserved. This sounds like the end of the story.

In the same way the disciples were surprised, we are surprised—God and Jesus were in cahoots against the powers of the world. By raising Jesus from the dead, God declared to the religious and political leaders, "This is not about you!" While they thought they had the upper hand and exercised all the power that mattered, God declared that God has been working behind the scenes the whole time.

Today's text brings the work and ministry of Jesus full circle. Luke tells us at the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan of

redemption for all of creation. God transformed a tragic consequence into a new thing—an acquittal and ultimate redemption. The ugliness of crucifixion gave way to the power of resurrection.

Just when we thought the story was over, God had something to say. It had always been about God and continues to be so. Jesus did not launch into explanations about the mechanics of resurrection, nor did he provide an itinerary of his whereabouts since Friday.

Instead, Jesus taught and commissioned: his whole life, death, and rising were about what God was and is doing in the world—reconciling the world to God's self. From the law of Moses to the prophets to the Psalms, it had always been about God and God's purposes, aims, and agenda for creation—repentance that leads to forgiveness of sins and the wholeness of creation.

The risen Christ appeared to groups and couples to assure them that he lived and continues to live; to teach them to put their fear and doubts in the context of God's grand plan; to open their understanding of the Scriptures; to commission them as witnesses of all that God has done and is doing in the world. Jesus declared that his followers were now equipped to be credible, reliable, ready witnesses in Jerusalem and to all nations, because of what they have seen and what they know. The defense is sure—Christ is risen! The work begins and continues because of the resurrection.

Today we live in a world of war, poverty, disease, neglect, prejudice, fear, isolation, and sinfulness. God sometimes seems powerless and absent in the face of ongoing suffering and pain. Despite the efforts of well-intentioned, generous, and sensitive persons, the world remains oppressive and inhospitable for many. In his book *Search for Common Ground*, Howard Thurman reminds us that "the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate" and that God is the giver of forgiveness and mercy, ever ready to offer peace: the possibility and promise that order, well-being, hope, compassion, and love will prevail.

Jesus is still the talk of the town! Wherever there is inhumanity, exploitation, discrimination, and hopelessness, Jesus shows up offering comfort, assurance, and a bit of fussing about our disbelief and unpreparedness. He invites us to be witnesses that it is all about God—God's intention to bring peace, unity, harmony, love, compassion, grace, justice, and mercy to a world that is broken and sinful. Jesus' post-Easter appearances assure us that God is alive and working on behalf of wholeness and community. The events of Hurricane Katrina did not *create* the glaring pictures of poverty and despair—they *exposed* them. David G. Buttrick's *The Mystery and the Passion* reminds us that "life is designed for mutuality—we live by exchanges" and that we are interdependent sisters and brothers and accountable to each other.

Today's scripture challenges us to find what in our communities needs the presence of the risen Christ? What kinds of experiences and understandings do we need so that we can be credible witnesses to God's aims in the world? What is our communal response to God's presence and work in the world? How do we participate in God's work on earth?

Recently I have had reminders of Jesus instructions to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all. First was my experience at Carriage Town Ministries at the end of March. The Holy Spirit reminded me that these men and women to whom I spoke were brothers and sisters in Christ. So, for the first time I was reminded that I was there to share the message, but also to learn from them as well. My second experience was at the General Board meeting where we agreed to change our ways of being church – we agreed to a concept of Mission First, with Mission Gathering to listen to the voice of God of what we are to be and do as a church and then organize our governance to support the mission, rather than the other way around. My last experience was on yesterday at the Festival of Faith. Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniels spoke to us about the Jesus statement that He is the Good Shepherd and we are the sheep. Sometimes we forget that we are sheep and think we are the shepherd. But we are only sheep, being cared for by the Shepherd. Our job is to be lead and live in community.

As we consider how we participate in God's work on earth and answer other questions of mission and ministry, Jesus commissions us to declare the presence and power of God in the midst of tragedy, despair, and death. They are not ultimate—God is. And God aims to redeem creation and us. The risen Christ makes himself known to us in ways large and small. As people of faith, we are to be witnesses to Christ's presence among us, in our words and in our deeds; our faith demands nothing less. Our job is to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ's name to all. **Barbara J. Essex**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.