

“Reality Check” – Luke 24:36-48

“They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.” With those few short and yet powerful brush strokes Luke paints a vivid picture of the disciples’ reaction as Jesus appeared among them. Images of wide eyes and cowering postures come to mind. Their reactions seem reasonable enough given the circumstances, for they were certain beyond all doubt that Jesus was dead. However, those reactions must have gotten a bit stale fairly quickly for Jesus. After all, every time he approached someone that knew him – even those who knew him best – he seems to have invoked the same kind of terrified and fearful reaction, people recoiling in fear from what they were certain must have been a ghost.

We should cut them a little slack, though – after all, they had seen him die a horrible death, they had watched his body taken down from the cross, they had at least heard if not seen for themselves that his body had been properly prepared for burial and buried in a cave. Seeing him now in their midst was more than they could believe, and so they were sure they were either losing their minds or this was a ghost. It was difficult if not impossible for them to believe that this really, really was Jesus, alive and well.

People over the past two thousand years have had similar trouble believing that Jesus rose from being dead, and they have invented many creative attempts to explain the events away. The ways that people have tried (and still try) to avoid the reality of Jesus’ resurrection range from declaring that the whole three years was either just people imagining things, or was a smoke-and-mirrors trick by God, or the favourite which was it was all a trick pulled off by people. At the one end of the spectrum are those who claim that Jesus was so God-like that he couldn’t really have died – “how can you kill God?” is their question – and that it only appeared that he died. At the other end of the spectrum are those who deny Jesus’ death and resurrection insisting that Jesus was completely human and that his death was faked. Movies such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the *DaVinci Code* have made tons of money from these themes.

Apparently these are not new themes, either, as the very presence of this particular passage in Luke’s gospel hints strongly that these kinds of denial stories were quickly circulating in the decades following Christ’s earthly ministry, his death and resurrection. Luke is careful to record details to counter these claims of denial, especially the detail of Jesus calming their fears by saying, “Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” They did, touch him, that is. I’m sure some of them at least expected to put their hand right through this apparition but were able to feel for themselves the scars, the holes, and his warm, alive flesh. With joy, wonderment, and still disbelief, they marveled at his appearance.

Then we encounter the most startling detail of all. “Got anything to eat?” Jesus asks them, and proceeds to scarf down some of their leftovers. He ate the grilled fish “in their presence” as Luke reminds us. The disciples were witness to Jesus eating, and that detail is crucially important because everyone KNOWS that ghosts don’t eat. Consistently throughout the ages, people have understood that ghosts may even seem to be solid, but ghosts NEVER eat! These events, and in particular the detailed recording of them, serve a major purpose – to affirm to the disciples, to affirm to us, the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. This passage in particular points to ordinary human actions – talking, seeing, touching, sharing food –connecting this highly extra-ordinary event with the lives of everyday people.

However, I think we need to take a moment here to deal with a side issue. Did any of you, when you heard about eating the fish, think for a moment at least that this was the episode of Jesus meeting the disciples on the beach and sharing a meal with them? I know I did when I first started looking at the text. It wasn’t until I did my usual reading of what goes before our

selected passage that I realized that Luke's account takes place in a closed room in Jerusalem as the two whom Jesus met on the road to Emmaus had returned and were telling their story to the eleven. That similar eating-of-fish tale which takes place on the beach is from John's gospel. You might wonder about the differences between these two accounts and ask how the two accounts could be so different. However, people will often offer differing accounts of the same event. For example, when Elizabeth and I are talking with people about trips we have taken, I will relate how something happened only to be stopped and 'corrected' by Elizabeth with a different version. Note that both of us had the exact same experience, but after only a few years the impressions of where, and when, and in which order have somehow diverged.

I suspect a similar phenomenon may be at work here in the gospels; that either because of differing memories or from reflecting different emphases we have two accounts of the same event. Two differing accounts of an event that did occur and stunned the disciples involved. More importantly an event that served as a proof of life, living proof that this was indeed their Jesus, once dead and now truly alive and in their midst.

And what a wondrous proof of life this was. Not with some booming voice from heaven, not with some magic signs spelled out by the stars rearranging into some celestial banner, not with earthquake, wind, or fire, but with the simple act of Jesus being with his people in person, talking with them, letting them touch him, and eating with them. Here in these moments Jesus provided the ultimate definition of what following him meant – that living out faith in him was to be done in community, in togetherness with him and with each other.

But more even than proving that he was alive and with them, there is also an interesting dual relationship that happens here as well – an action and a reaction. The disciples feed Jesus with fish and then Jesus proceeds to feed them – but this time with the word in scripture. This feeding of the disciples by the fed Jesus serves to provide both the cause for his appearance with them and the meaning and the purpose that was to be served. Jesus went on to explain that his coming to dinner with them was not merely to prove the reality of his resurrection, but that there was a reason and a purpose behind it all.

That reason, the cause of his appearance among them, according to Jesus was to fulfill scripture. He not only opened their minds to understand the scriptures, but also pointed out how what he had said when with them before about everything written about him in the Law and the Prophets (in scripture) must be fulfilled, and was indeed being fulfilled by his very presence with them. This was no random event; not only was Jesus' resurrection real it was anticipated and foretold in scripture. This gives the reality of it all infinitely more depth, doesn't it?

Not only more depth, but with the intentionality of these events now the question becomes one of "what is God's purpose in all this?" a question that Jesus answered for the disciples, and indeed for us as well. "That repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in the Messiah's name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." Ah, now there is a purpose and meaning worthy of God's intervention in history, a purpose and meaning deep enough for such miraculous events. Repentance and forgiveness of sins – truly God's hand at work in Jesus. Proclaimed to all nations – an event significant enough to bring meaning to the entire world.

Moreover, there is a subsequent purpose, not to be overlooked or forgotten. "You are witnesses to these things", Jesus told those disciples, and tells us today. We are, in our turn, witnesses to the profound saving events of Jesus' death, resurrection and reappearance. We are witnesses to the continuing presence of Christ among us, proclaiming "Peace be with you." We are witnesses also to his call to witness and proclaim.

To that small band of his gathered faithful the risen Christ said, "Touch me and see." To us who come here to meet the risen Christ, he still says, "touch me and see." "How can we?" we protest, "it's too long ago and too far away!". To those who in joy still wonder and have trouble believing, Christ also asks, "got anything to eat?", and we say, "yes, but how can we feed you?" How indeed? Well, he has told us how to do that as well. "As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me", Christ reminds us, and the truth begins to dawn anew. Touch him, through the gentle holding of a hand busy otherwise trying to wring comfort from grief. Feed him, through the filling of a plate with pancakes and sausage. Clothe him, with the gifts of socks, shoes, sweaters, coats – and above all, dignity. Join him in healing, through providing the money for medicine, soap, clean water, and a signal that someone cares.

Here is our reality; here is where we begin to understand, to believe, that this is no ghost, no 'other-worldly' spectre. As we touch Christ through touching others he powerfully reminds us of his true humanity, how he still shares with us the full range of human emotions, joy and frustration, excitement and disappointment, satisfaction and hunger and thirst. In Christ's demonstration of power over even death itself he reassures us of his divineness, truly one with God, fulfilling the promise of mercy, grace, forgiveness and reconciliation. In his presence with us through his Holy Spirit, he continues to bring us the peace he promised, reassuring us that the naysayers are wrong, the spiritual hijackers are wrong, the deniers are wrong, that we are right to believe and proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name.

He lives! The risen Christ lives, and touches us still. Christ is real, and right, and the good news he brought and continues to bring, the good news of God's grace and forgiveness are real. He lives, and because he lives, we live also. Reach out and touch him, fulfill his proclamation, "you are witnesses ... proclaiming repentance and forgiveness to all nations in his name."