

“Seeing is Believing”
Luke 24:36-48
April 18, 2021

In this age of uncertainty, it would be nice to see something tangible so it can be believed. Whether it is the effectiveness of a COVID-19 vaccine, the positive benefits of a rigorous diet program or, a statement showing growth from a careful investment strategy, we want to see measurable results. So how do we cope—how can we find peace—in the unexplained visionary tall tale that speaks to our faith, not our certainty? Hear what the Spirit is saying to us in Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 24, beginning with the 36th verse:

While they were saying all this [about their sighting of the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus], Jesus appeared to them and said, “Peace be with you.” They thought they were seeing a ghost and were scared half to death. He continued with them, “Don’t be upset, and don’t let all these doubting questions take over. Look at my hands; look at my feet—it’s really me. Touch me. Look me over from head to toe. A ghost doesn’t have muscle and bone like this.” As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. They still couldn’t believe what they were seeing. It was too much; it seemed too good to be true.

He asked, “Do you have any food here?” They gave him a piece of leftover fish they had cooked. He took it and ate it right before their eyes.

Then he said, “Everything I told you while I was with you comes to this: All the things written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms have to be fulfilled.”

He went on to open their understanding of the Word of God, showing them how to read their Bibles this way. He said, “You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations—starting from here, from Jerusalem! You’re the first to hear and see it. You’re the witnesses. What comes next is very important: I am sending what my Father promised to you, so stay here in the city until he arrives, until you’re equipped with power from on high.”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

How do we know the vaccine works? I want proof! I want to know that I’m safe if I go to a rave this weekend with 4000 other gyrating sweaty people moving to an undefined loud music beat. I want to know if I can attend a backyard BBQ and leave my mask at home. I want to know if it’s safe to travel now, because my plans have been on hold long enough! How I miss our kids and grandchildren. How I miss in-person Rockies games, movies in the movie theatre, dinner parties for milestone birthdays and holidays, and bridge

games with my friends. How do we know? We have to wait and see. We have to see it to believe it that we are moving past this blasted pandemic.

Every month I reconcile our family checkbook. Meticulously I check every single entry. I record the expenditures and deposits on my computer spreadsheet and match it against the bank statements. If there is a discrepancy, though I wish it was a bank error, I know in my heart of hearts that it is my error somewhere in my numbers recording that has caused the problem. So back I go through it all again, even if my accounting is just a single penny off balance. I have to see it for myself, because seeing is believing.

Then there's the bathroom scale, the biggest liar of all. I weigh every day, because in the past year I worked hard to lose some pounds and I don't want to gain them back. Seeing is believing, so I rely on my scale to let me know how I am doing. I conveniently forget the donut I ate yesterday or that I didn't include vegetables with my dinner, but my scale tells on me with brutal honesty. Seeing is believing.

The disciples are shocked when an image of Jesus appears before them in the Upper Room. They are all together up there in the first place because of Jesus' crucifixion and the warrant that has been put out against all of them for their arrest. Terrified, disheartened, and in shock, they huddle together not knowing what to do next, where to turn for help, or how to get away from there without being seen.

The vision appears before them and says the oddest thing: "Peace be with you." Peace be with you, Jesus says! How could this be so. Of all the myriad emotions coursing through their veins in that place and time, *peace* was probably at the very bottom of the list.

Peace was when Jesus sat on the hillside in the gentle noonday sun and beckoned the children to come sit with him so he could tell them about God's love for them.

Peace was when Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer and they all memorized it together, repeating it before they fell asleep at night, before they got up in the morning, and together before their meals.

Peace was when Jesus told them they were blessed, even though they had no money and no power. They were meek, poor, and disheartened, and yet he still promised them the kingdom of heaven.

Peace was when Jesus gently washed their achy and blistered feet, inviting them to rest from their work and their walking.

Peace was the bread that Jesus broke for them and the wine cup he passed to them in the cool of the evening in the garden when they all promised to remember him.

Their lives had been anything *but* peaceful since that night, for Judas had betrayed their Master with a kiss and the rest of that night and the next days had been sheer hell on earth.

The disciples knew no peace. They were hunted. They were devastated. They were anxious and afraid for themselves, for their friends, and for their families. It wasn't supposed to go like this. How could God let this happen to God's own Beloved? And if God had left them in their desperate hour of need, how were they supposed to believe in God's love? How were they to believe *anything* that Jesus had told them?

"Peace be with you," the vision of Jesus said to them. Seeing is believing and they all saw him. He invited them to touch the holes in his hands and feet,

though they dared not. He ate a piece of fish, or so it seemed. They did not know what to think, what to believe.

There was Jesus, teaching them just as he had before the Great Horror. Though he had endured the worst behavior possible in humans, he was teaching them about forgiveness and love. He was assuring them that God had plans for them, that God had not abandoned them as they feared.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that,

During the day it is hard to remember that all the stars in the sky are out there all the time, even when [we] are too blinded by the sun to see them...It is always night somewhere.

Seeing is believing, but faith has its own rhythm, its own ways. Faith reminds us that the stars are out there even when we can't see them. Faith compels us to take that halting first step towards God, believing, as mythologist Joseph Campbell assures us, that God takes 10 steps towards us at the same time. Faith is seeing a vision of Jesus when we are sitting in a hospital room –or wishing we could be in the hospital room-- where our loved one is breathing his or her final earthly breaths. Faith is feeling the hand of Jesus on our shoulder when we are holding our pet as its life slips slowly and peacefully away from us and to the great beyond. Faith is hearing Jesus say, “Peace be with you” when you are packing up your belongings to leave the family home ahead of the divorce, or sitting in the courtroom with your lawyer, waiting to be escorted off to prison, or heading off to military service during wartime. Just like the disconnect the disciples are all feeling upon hearing these words, you might also wonder how in world are you to find peace at a time like this?

Pastor Robin Meyer in his book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, speaks the truth when he says that, “[b]eing a disciple today often means little more than believing stuff in order to get stuff.” We recently talked about Jesus’s teaching that you must lose yourself to gain the world, to gain that elusive peace your soul yearns for. Meyer continues,

...to follow a teacher of wisdom named Jesus means submitting to an entirely different ethic- that we must lose ourselves in order to find ourselves. But in

our culture we are always urged to do exactly the opposite- to “find ourselves.”

Peace is not something we can wrestle to the ground like a steer with immovable horns. It is elusive, often fleeting, and is an emotion of the heart. You can’t will it to be so, or outflank it or write a check and buy it. The disciples had to lose themselves to gain it. They had to leave the Upper Room, taking the chance that they would be identified, believe what Jesus was telling them that God was just beginning the real work in them, and strike out on their own in mission and service.

Dorothee Soelle was born in Germany in 1929 and was raised during the years of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Her writings are theological reflections on coming to grips with the horrors of concentration camps and life after World War II, realizing that her heritage of Protestant liberalism had failed to stop the war. She challenges the human propensity for wanting safety and security from God. In her essay, “Jesus’ Death,” Soelle writes,

...because you are strong [in Christ], you can put the neurotic need for security behind you. You do not need to defend your life like a lunatic. For the love of the poor, Jesus says, you can give your life away and spread it around.

When Luke's vision of Jesus tells the disciples that they should not go out to share God's word until "clothed with the power on high," these are the tandem powers of compassion and faith to which he refers. The disciples had forgotten how to lead with compassion, for they were terrified for their own safety and were not concerned with how others, too were broken, hungry and scared for their lives. And they had lost faith after seeing Jesus led away, tortured, sentenced to death, and hanged from a cross. Like Dorothee Soelle, they had to lose their need for the locked room before they could live into a greater purpose than self-preservation.

The vision of Jesus appearing in the Upper Room, the story told them by the two Marys of the Empty Tomb and the angel's discourse with them, and the two disciples' accounts of yet another sighting of the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus all served to help restore their faith. After all, seeing *is* believing.

"Jesus brings change to the disciples' lives as they move from (1) fright and alarm to (2) joy, mixed with disbelief and puzzlement, to (3) open and understanding minds and hearts.' (Nancy R. Blakely, *Feasting on the Word*). Jesus never promises security; quite the opposite, actually. But in Jesus, we are empowered to unlock our doors and step out into the world, secure only in that we know God steps out with us, that the stars are above us in the sky even though we can't always see them, and that faith will guide our way forward.

Two of the 9/11 widows learned that widows in Afghanistan, already living difficult lives, lose status when they lose their husbands, making their lives even more precarious. The American widows started a foundation called Beyond the 11th to help these women, even making visits to meet the widows

in Afghanistan that they were helping. For the 9/11 widows, these connections and the ancient practice of hospitality have helped to again make sense of the world and has led them to find their own peace. “They model for us the gift of open and understanding minds and hearts.”(Blakely)

Beyond the 11th is an example of how we can take chaos and loss and channel it not into anger or revenge, but into positive change for the world. If I had lost a loved one in the 9/11 attacks, I could only hope I would be brave enough to choose active peace over war. This is precisely what Jesus asks of his disciples who have watched him die an unwarranted death. Do not go on paralyzed by grief, he tells them. “Peace be with you,” he says.

Alexander John Shaia in his commentary on this passage presses us as twenty-first century Christians and disciples with important and timely questions:

The resurrection stories teach us about our ability

to renew our vitality and stay present to the divine in our lives. When we find ourselves simply walking through our days, will we still feel the burning in our hearts? Will we come back together, break bread, and share our stories with others?

Will we have eyes to be present to the miraculous throughout the day—to stay with wonder and curiosity and a positive attitude—to anticipate the unexpected ways that things can work out?

In our personal relationships, will we understand that a genuine friend shares only when asked- and with mindfulness of the place where our companion is on his or her journey? We will continually meet others who are in different places of understanding than we are, and we need to take this into account when we consider how we think about their words and actions and when we communicate. Judgment and condemnation will have to be suspended, even at times abandoned.

We may even need to meet them in a different path of worship or faith. It is both test and testament of our compassion and our commitment to the journey when we are able to greet all persons with the same degree of love and honor and respect with which we would meet the Christ.

These are insightful questions that have the capacity to lead us into a central teaching of Jesus: we must lose ourselves to find peace. As the disciples eventually understand, peacemaking fosters the belief that God is never through working through us for the good, that God-Alive has never left our side, and that Jesus is ever sending us forth to heal the broken world.

May It Be So.

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