

Luke 24: 36-49 Faith and Doubt

This morning's gospel reading from Luke about early resurrection appearances of Jesus describes an entirely different occurrence than did last week's reading from the gospel of John. Within the testimonies of our New Testament canon we have four accounts about Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. Each of them was written down some time after the events--long enough that many who had actually seen Jesus was no longer living. Each represents a witness to Jesus; to what he said and did; and more importantly who he was. At the time of the writing of the gospels, the church had not yet formulated the doctrines which we take for granted. Each gospel was written with a particular group of believers in mind. Sometimes we forget that reality because we have access to them all equally and often tend to pool them together in our minds. We take favorite portions of the story from this one and that one and weave them together. Each of the gospel accounts about Jesus' birth is presented differently. In many aspects, each account about the events just preceding the crucifixion as well as those just after the tomb is found empty are reported quite differently. As I have mentioned before, the gospel of John is often unique in the events which are described. Last week we read an account which only appears in John's gospel: the two fold appearance of Jesus in a closed room to the ten disciples followed a week later by an encore appearance with Thomas present. For many, this account in John has earned that disciple the nickname of doubting Thomas. In fact, this account is so familiar that doubting Thomas is a phrase used widely to describe anyone who requires proof before acceptance. In many cases, those who hear, read or discuss this account focus on Thomas' statements of disbelief when told this amazing news of a risen Jesus by his fellow disciples. That his statement of requirements before belief are actually things that the ten who convey the news have already received when Jesus appeared the week before--well, that is largely overlooked. Our gospel reading from Luke is also set in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion. The women have found the tomb empty, been told by two men in dazzling white robes that Jesus had risen, and have reported back to the eleven disciples and other followers what they have seen and have been told. The disciples' do not believe them, although Peter then goes and also finds the tomb empty. Two followers of Jesus, not among those twelve chosen to become Apostles have left Jerusalem that morning in dejection over their lost hope that Jesus was the one sent to redeem Israel. This is even after hearing the reports that the tomb had been found empty. As they are walking to the village of Emmaus, Jesus appears and walks along with them talking with them as they go. As we all know in this story, they do not recognize him until they persuade him to dine with them in order to continue the conversation they are having about what the scriptures have said about the Messiah. Then something in the way he breaks the bread allows them to recognize him and they hurriedly go back to Jerusalem to tell their news. Luke does not describe the actual appearance of Jesus to Simon Peter, but evidently by the time the two have returned from Emmaus, Peter has also seen the risen Lord and come back to report this to his fellow disciples. Yet even with this preparation, when Jesus joins them in the room where they have gathered to discuss these things—their response is to be startled, frightened and think they are seeing a ghost. Jesus seems very patient with them, asking why they are frightened and doubtful. Then he invites them to touch him, look at his hands and feet much as he had done according to John's account

of what happened when he first appeared. At this point Luke tells us in verse 41: “while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’” Jesus then eats fish in their presence and again explains to them the scriptures which he had fulfilled. These accounts of Jesus’ encounters with his disciples can be summed up by simply saying that these first chosen disciples did not believe what had happened. Even forewarned three times before the crucifixion that it was on the horizon, but that he would rise again—the temple would be rebuilt—the empty tomb did not signal the resurrection to them. When told by messengers at the empty tomb that he was no longer among the dead, the women go back and report to the disciples that the Lord is risen. The disciples still did not understand. It is only when they touch the risen Lord and feel his physical presence, when he again explains to them what has happened after the fact—then do they begin to believe. Keeping in mind that this appearance as described in Luke is about Jesus’ first appearance to the disciples just as the one we read last week from John described that communities’ tradition about this first post resurrection encounter, what do we learn from them taken as a whole? We learn that the disciples—those who had been chosen and spent most of his ministry with him—still did not really expect the resurrection to occur and also had some difficulty accepting it when it did. When Jesus suddenly appears among them, they are frightened. The first thing that Jesus says to them is Shalom—Peace be with you. This peace that Jesus offers comes before they have accepted the reality of the risen Lord. Jesus brings them peace before they have faith. Part of their fear is that Jesus is now a ghost. Jesus has them touch him so they can feel his physical presence. This is important because it underscores that he is not a spirit but a living being. Even if we cannot physically touch Christ ourselves, we know that when we receive the gospel and share it, we are being witnesses to an embodiment which fulfills God’s promise for eternal life. This fulfillment of God’s promise for us through Jesus’ resurrection means that what Jesus instructed during his ministry for being his disciple was true. It also means that we need to assume that Jesus really meant the things he taught that his followers were to do—how they were to treat others, especially the marginalized. If we believe in the resurrection, then we as disciples are called to follow the teachings. We also need to remember that when Jesus was recognized, to allay their fears and demonstrate that he was physically present, Jesus showed them the nail marks in his hands and feet. Even resurrected, Jesus’ body bears witness to a way of being for others. His wounds embody his love. The identification of Jesus of Nazareth as the eternal living Christ is critical not only for theology and doctrine, but also for how we are to define the nature of Christian life. If the Jesus who died belongs to the historical past but the one whom the disciples now encounter is the eternal Christ, then the Christian life can take on forms of spirituality that are without suffering for others—forms without a cross. These are forms which do not require any engagement with the issues of life in this broken world but only an expression of devotion to a living spiritual Christ. But the gospels tell us the resurrected Christ still bore the marks of his suffering. I think that it is important for us to remember that the initial doubts of the disciples did not matter in the long run. Through recounting the ways he had fulfilled the scriptures and his encounters with them, the disciples believed. When the women believe, they ran back to tell others. They became witnesses. When the two who encountered the risen Jesus and his identity was revealed to them—they went hurriedly back to tell others. They became witnesses. After Simon Peter saw the risen

Lord, even when he did not fully understand it, he went back to the others to tell them and talk about it in community. He too was witnessing, even in his doubts. That is what disciples do. They gather together and witness to each other about their encounters with the risen Lord. Near the end of today's passage we are told that after Jesus again explained how he fulfilled scripture, he told them "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." This is the commissioning which occurs in Luke. It is not as well remembered as such as the verse from Matthew, but it is still the same message. These disciples who now understand are to continue to be his witnesses and are going to be empowered to witness to the whole world. This is what the writers of the gospel accounts did when they wrote about Jesus of Nazareth. They witnessed to what they knew and experienced. We are called to do the same. We can take comfort in the fact that even though the disciples knew doubt, Christ came to them and allayed those doubts bringing them to an understanding which they did not have previously. There are events which happen in our world which we do not understand, which may cause us to question our faith. The most common one revolves around the suffering we see in this broken world. Why, we ask does God who is good allow it to happen. In this sense, doubt prods and challenges us, but in the end through the grace of God, our doubts can bring us to a deeper faith and a greater trust in God. As we gather together with others who follow Christ, as we delve into the witness we have been left by others, as we encounter the risen Lord through the Holy Spirit moving within us—we too have our doubts set apart and in turn become witnesses to the risen Lord. Remembering that Jesus did not reject the disciples because they doubted, but reached out to them; we can in confidence express our doubts to him and to each other because through all our doubts, God never once doubts us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.