

Too good to be true?

The title of today's sermon comes from a phrase I have heard all my life about various things...deals that are offered whose terms are said to be "too good to be true". Like many of you, I imagine, I have stopped answering my telephone unless I recognize the voice or the number due to the many telephone calls many of which are "offers" of deals that are like those mentioned above..."too good to be true." In fact, my telephone now has a feature which identifies some calls not by their number but by the ID of "spam risk." Unfortunately, the news carries too many stories of people who answer these calls or other types of offers and get taken in and lose money, or get taken advantage of in other ways through them. It is sometimes hard to discern who or what to believe, especially if the offer is made to appeal to something we desire. As we look at the reading from Luke's gospel for today, which takes up the narrative of events which also happen later in the day after the discovery of the empty tomb. This passage comes just after the more familiar one which describes Jesus joining two unnamed disciples who decide to leave Jerusalem after the Passover is over because of their disappointment of the events which have taken place during the festival. That passage is the one known as the walk to Emmaus where the unrecognized Jesus joins them on their walk. They relate how the tomb was found empty by women who were told Jesus was alive, but they cannot believe this. Jesus then explains the events to them as fulfillment of scripture. When invited to join them for a meal, in the breaking of the bread, they recognize him and he vanishes from their sight. So they return to Jerusalem to tell the others what has happened on their walk. This is the entry point for our passage...the topic for the "While they were talking about this" which marks Jesus' entry into the group. What unfolds in this narrative follows much the same way as did the account from John's gospel. We are not told that the disciples are gathered in a locked room in fear, but when Jesus suddenly appears among them their response is: "they were startled and terrified." Despite having been told by the women who found the tomb empty that Jesus was alive, they had not believed the news...it was too good to be true. The women's reaction to the empty tomb had been to be puzzled and perplexed; their reaction to the angels, the two men in the tomb who gave them the message was the same as that of the disciples now...they were terrified. All this reaction comes as the disciples are dealing with their new reality...they are grieving, they are facing lost hopes and are despairing over those as well. So hearing from even those of their group that the hopes may not have been crushed is not something they can accept...it is simple news that they is a tale they cannot believe...it is too good to be true. So when Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." Their first reaction was to be terrified, not joyful. They are disbelieving. The narrative records they thought they were seeing a ghost. The first greeting Jesus seems to always need to give on all these appearances is "shalom", "Peace be with you." A greeting which wishes wholeness of mind, body and spirit for those greeted. And Jesus proceeds to give them that peace by his reassurances. As in the John's gospel, Jesus points out the wounds on his hands and feet as identification marks that it is he, also inviting them to touch as well as see, "for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Now it seems the disciples begin to feel joy, although Luke says there are some lingering doubts: "while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of

broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.” In Luke’s account, just the sight of Jesus does not seem enough to convince the disciples that Jesus is really alive. Here, sight alone is not sufficient...the news still seems too good to be true. Having established that the news was real, that he was indeed alive...Jesus set about reminding them of all that they had seen and heard, their work was just beginning: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” Not only did Jesus again explain the role of the Messiah for them, he also then gave them their assignment—they were to take up his mission: “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” You are witnesses of these things, and being the witnesses you are to go and proclaim these things. That’s what witnesses do. Basically this is Jesus telling his disciples, and us, that disciples are the called-into court-sworn-witness of the things which Jesus revealed about God and God’s love. So get ready to testify to the truth and nothing but the truth. Proclaim it. And shakily at first, that is what those men did. And that is how the Greek word for “witness” has become known and used as an English word...martyr...which tells you that although effective being a witness to the truth of Jesus Christ is not always easy. There is something about the way this “news” spread in these narratives in the beginning. As each person encountered the risen Lord, they went back to the others to “report”, to witness to their encounter. This points out that faith has always been a community endeavor. From the very beginning, we find the early Christians—even before they were known as Christians—gathered together to share with each other the bewildering experiences they have had with the risen Christ. A common theme in the stories about the disciples discovering that Jesus was alive is that they immediately went back to the rest of the group to tell the others what had happened. It’s one thing for them to race back from the tomb to the upper room both located in Jerusalem. It’s another thing altogether for the disciples on the road to Emmaus to run 7 miles back to the rest of the group to share the good news with the others. In the narrative, it clearly states that they got up that same hour and went back. When they got back, the “eleven” were saying that Jesus had risen, so they joined in and shared what they had experienced. The cumulative effect is that in the sharing they were supporting and encouraging and strengthening each other’s faith! Sometimes we forget that the resurrection is not a “fact” to be believed, but an experience to be shared. This is probably true of all aspects of our faith. It simply is not something that can flourish in a context of spiritual “a loneliness”. Faith flourishes in a community. There is something about faith that needs to be carried out “in the presence of all God’s people.” Henri Nouwen puts it this way: “Christian community is the place where we keep the flame of hope alive among us...That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in each other.” And then we witness it to the world not only by the things we say, but also by the things we do, by the way we show our love and compassion for others. Because God’s love for the world is truly Good News...Good News so wonderful and so very True. Thanks be to God.

