

Sermon
April 23, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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The Crucial Evidence
Luke 24:36-53

I love a good mystery that provides layers of intrigue and good character studies. Authors love to insert a mystery in all kinds of books to keep readers reading. It's the same thing that makes a good crime drama on TV worth watching. We get interested and involved in the characters lives at the same time they are trying to find that key piece of evidence that will solve the mystery of who done it. Series like NCIS, NCIS:LA or NCIS New Orleans - some of my favorites - and the CSI series have become popular because of our love of mysteries.

As I was reading our scripture for this week - the final resurrection story in the gospel of Luke - and reread all the gospel accounts of the resurrection - I began to wonder what the crucial evidence was that finally convinced the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. I think the answer is found in our scripture today.

Three of the gospels provide stories of Jesus appearing to one or two individuals. In Matthew Jesus met Mary Magdalene and the other Mary outside the tomb telling them to go tell the disciples that he had risen. In John Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb where she mistook him for the gardener. Just last week we heard the story in Luke of Jesus appearing on the road to Emmaus to Cleopas and his companion. And right before our passage for today when Cleopas and his companion return to Jerusalem to share what they had experienced we hear that Jesus had appeared to Simon also.

Jesus in our passage today appeared to the group of disciples - the eleven and their companions just as they were talking about how some of them had seen the risen Christ. He offered words of greeting - "*Peace be with you.*" The disciples immediate reaction was to be startled and terrified

thinking they were seeing a ghost. We would probably have thought the same thing! After all he appeared out of nowhere but what he said and did in that moment provided three pieces of crucial evidence that convinced them that he had risen from the grave.

First, he showed them tangible evidence that he was the same person they saw crucified. The same person who only a few days before had hung on the cross and died before their very eyes. *“Look at my hands and feet, see that it is I myself.”* It was Jesus’ hands and feet that provided the proof for they held the scars of the nails that had been pounded into his flesh breaking bones to nail him to the cross. Friends, the scars were fresh and raw maybe even still crusted with blood or scabs. It is impossible to hid scars like that even after a length of time for it takes a great deal of time for scars to heal - most always leaving remnants behind even years later.

I broke my ankle years ago - almost twenty-five year ago now - and had to have surgery putting a plate and screws in to repair it. You can still see the scar where they cut my skin open and my ankle to this day shows the effects of that trauma on my body. Jesus not only showed them his hands and feet but he invited them to touch and see wanting them to know he had flesh and bones just like they did. His feet may also have been dusty showing that he had walked into the space from outside and not floated in like a ghost. I imagine him walking around the room letting each one of them touch his scars and feel the wounds. John recounts Thomas’ need to do just that to believe. But scripture tells us even though they felt joy they *“were disbelieving and still wondering.”* They weren’t convinced yet.

Next Jesus asked for something to eat - the second piece of crucial evidence. I wonder if they were eating at the time for they provided him with a piece of broiled fish like it was sitting on the table waiting to be shared. Jesus took the fish and ate it in their presence. Friends, ghosts don’t eat, swallow and digest food! John also recounts the disciples and Jesus sharing of a meal by the Sea of

Tiberias after the resurrection but only here does it say specifically that Jesus ate the fish.

It is not only the fact that Jesus ate that is significant but the fact that he joined them in table fellowship. For that was something he had done so many times before. Fish might have been Jesus' favorite food for all we know and reminded the disciples of how much he enjoyed it. But regardless this action of eating fish told them this risen Jesus was the same one who had eaten with them when he was alive. The same one who had shared table fellowship and hospitality not only to them but to the outcasts and the poor, the tax collectors and sinners. The same one who at their last meal together had taken the bread and the cup and given them new meaning.

Think about that meal you make - you know the recipe that every time you make it reminds you of your mother or grandmother for it was their favorite recipe. Each year at Thanksgiving on the day after Thanksgiving I make a turkey spaghetti with the left over turkey. It is my mother's recipe and my children have come to associate it with me now. There is great comfort in putting that recipe together and eating it remembering all the meals we shared at table over turkey spaghetti for years in my home growing up and now in my home today. Friends, that is what the disciples experienced when Jesus ate fish with them at table.

But it is the final piece of evidence Jesus provided that made the real difference for them. Jesus reminded them of what he had taught them when he was still with them. This risen Jesus was the same one who had taught them so much. There was consistency between what he had taught them before and what he taught them that day. He said *"everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."* He went on to open their minds to hear and understand scripture.

As I looked back over the other gospels this is the only time we are told that Jesus taught the group of disciples after the resurrection. They had a chance to sit at his feet once again - the place of

learning that had brought them such insight and joy. He reminded them of how it was *“written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day...”*

Just imagine the scene a minute - Jesus saying - “and look that is what has happened - look at me. I have risen from the dead. Remember scripture says *“repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in my name to all nations.”* Remember how we saw that lived out during my ministry. How people were changed through the power of forgiveness. And now my friends, that is what you are called to do. You are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. *“You are witnesses of these things.”* You walked with me, you sat at my feet, you listened as I opened scriptures and now it is up to you. This is what I have been preparing you for. This is why I have come among you now as the risen Christ. So you can tell people you have seen me and that I have risen from the dead and walk among you. You have seen the crucial evidence. You know why everything had to happen as it did.

But know this, you don’t have to do it alone. I am sending the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon you so that you can tell my story to others with power....”

Friends, this crucial evidence was what solved the mystery for the disciples. But mysteries are not solved unless someone invests in putting the pieces together. In taking the time to tell the story in a way that others come to understand and believe that it happened that way. That was the disciples task and it is our task. We must be witnesses - those who tell the story - who recount how Jesus was crucified. How Christ suffered and died and was buried on the third day. How he rose from the dead and appeared to the community of disciples gathered at table and shared a meal. How he opened up scripture to them and reminded them of the power of scripture to continue to teach them so they could share his story with the world.

Even in the midst of this pandemic we are finding new ways to tell God’s story. For nothing -

even a stay at home order - can keep us from sharing the gospel with all the world. And we are doing it now powerfully on the worldwide web. Some of you have told me you have shared our services with others which we can do in a moment on the Internet. And I have heard from some in our assisted living facilities who are being able to hear the message when they couldn't before. A reminder that God is using this situation to spread his message in new ways.

And yet I must admit to you that this new medium makes it harder to know if the message is getting through. For you do not know who is even listening and have no way of knowing the impact the words make unless someone tells you. And yet this is really nothing new. For preachers and missionaries who spread the gospel often do not know if their message has been really heard and what difference it has made in people's lives. For sometimes it takes years to see the effects or for others to make a point of telling you how their lives have been changed.

In 1912 a medical missionary named Dr. William Leslie went to live and minister to tribal people in a remote corner of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. After 17 years he returned to the United States a discouraged man for he believed he failed to make an impact for Christ. He died nine years later.

But in 2010 almost 100 years later there was an amazing discovery. A team from Tom Cox World Ministries led by Eric Ramsey found a network of reproducing churches hidden like glittering diamonds in the dense jungle across the Kwilu River from Vanga. There were eight churches in villages scattered across 34 miles. What they discovered was that Dr. Leslie had crossed the Kwilu River once a year from Vanga and spent a month traveling through the jungle, carried by servants in a sedan chair telling the story of Christ. Ramsey learned that Dr. Leslie had taught the Bible, taught the village children how to read and write, talked about the importance of education and told Bible stories. There is no Bible in the Yansi language so he used a French Bible and those who continued to teach

were fluent in French. It took a while to learn Dr. Leslie's name for the community only knew him by one name but after doing some research Ramsey came to realize that it was Dr. William Leslie who had witnessed to these remote communities.

(http://godreports.com/2014/05/missionary-died-thinking-he-was-a-failure-84-years-later-thriving-churches-found-hidden-in-the-jungle/?fbclid=IwAR3BJNJicfBTYVYVJE_mkWLKBnnxOhfvGZEocSwVlkVWDGaRgvjcNpesqa8)

Friends, he thought he was a failure. But he was far from that. For when people were presented the crucial evidence of a Savior who died on a cross for them, a risen Christ who invites them into community, and had the word of God shared with them people were changed and the story continued to be told in those villages.

So my friends, our challenge as those who are learning to tell the story in new ways in the midst of a pandemic is to continue to be Christ's witnesses sharing the story of the risen Christ so that all the world might come to know him. For God will use us and our experiences in ways we cannot even imagine. For there is power in our stories. A power that Jesus promised the disciples would be with them. A power that birthed the church of Jesus Christ. For we as Christ's witness believe and we have the crucial evidence to convince others.

The question is will we share that evidence with others? Will we tell the story in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in so that all the world might come to know Christ as their Savior?