

Reports of My Death Are Greatly Exaggerated

Luke 24: 36-48

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Mark Twain was about to leave the United States for London when a false obituary of his death was printed in a British paper. As only Mark Twain would, he sent a cable to his London friends saying, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

Something like that happens after Easter.

It is late on Easter Day, the day shocking rumors about Jesus are circulating through Jerusalem. According to Luke, the disciples are gathered together when a Jesus-follower from Emmaus finds the eleven and begins to tell them of the incredible experience that happened to him earlier in the day. You remember from last week’s sermon, two travelers are walking near Emmaus on Easter afternoon and a stranger joins them, who turns out to be the resurrected Jesus. One of those travelers has now returned to Jerusalem and is telling his story to the disciples. While he is telling it, Jesus appears among them! Luke says the disciples are startled, terrified, frightened, and doubtful. I understand, don’t you? It is one thing to hear a rumor that Jesus is alive; it is quite another to have the once-dead man in your midst.

A young girl cried out in the middle of the night after a bad dream and her mother came in and tried to comfort her. When the mother was ready to leave, she told her daughter, “Don’t be afraid; God is with you.”

But the daughter protested, saying, “I know that, Mommy, but I want somebody with some skin on.”ⁱ

Jesus must have wanted the disciples to know that he was not a ghost but a resurrected God-man with some “skin on.” He shows the disciples his hands and feet... and even eats some of the broiled fish! He is not just a spirit. He wants his disciple friends to know he is physically alive.

John Crabtree was a Vietnam vet receiving disability benefits because of his war injuries. One day, however, he received an official notification from the United States Government of his own death!

Crabtree wrote the government saying he was very much alive and would like, of course, to continue receiving his disability benefits. No response. He then tried calling the government but again, nothing changed. Finally, as a last resort, he contacted a local television station who aired his story. During the interview, the reporter asked him, “How do you feel about this whole ordeal?” Crabtree chuckled and said, “Well, I feel a little frustrated by it. After all, have you ever tried to prove that you’re alive?”ⁱⁱ

Jesus was intent on proving he is alive. But talk about uncertainty, the disciples were filled with it. Startled, frightened, doubting.

I remember a delightful movie from almost twenty years ago titled, *It Could Happen To You*. Nicolas Cage plays a New York policeman named Charley who has coffee in a diner. When he finishes, he discovers he does not have enough cash to pay both for the coffee and leave a tip. So he gives Yvonne, the waitress, a choice. He will come back tomorrow with double the tip; or, taking a lottery ticket out of his wallet, he promises to split the winnings if he should win the lottery.

She is dubious but accepts his lottery offer...and you can guess the rest. I mean this is a Hollywood script! Charley wins four million dollars and returns to the diner the next morning to give Yvonne the good news... that she will get half of his millions.

Talk about disbelief and uncertainty! She says, “Why are you doing this to me? Is this some sort of cruel joke? No. It couldn’t happen.”

Charley insists he is not joking... to which she says, “Can it really be true?”

Charley smiles and says, “It could happen. It has happened. It has happened to you.”

When Jesus appears to the disbelieving disciples, they are thinking, *Can it really be true?* Jesus could have said, “It could happen. It has happened. It has happened to you.”

But we sense the uncertainty of the disciples. So I am thinking — doesn’t it seem to you that *that* is the spiritual condition we sometimes find ourselves in... a place of uncertainty? I mean the idea of God in our lives is startling and can be full of doubt. “Oh, come on. Even if God is, how God could appear in my life when I am such an insignificant piece in this great cosmic puzzle?”

But if we are lucky, or blessed, or as Luke says of the disciples that our “eyes are opened,” joy can replace our doubt as our relationship with God develops and grows deeper.

It could happen ... which is what Easter is about... which is what this Jesus appearance was about... which is what the church is about.

Cassandra was a frightened single mother living on government assistance in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods. Her doctor had just told her she was pregnant again. She wondered about the possibility of an abortion. But, her doctor suggested that she talk to one of the pastors connected to the Christian medical clinic where they were.

She did. She expected fire and judgement but received instead a kindly minister who listened, who told her of God's love for her and invited her to church. She accepted the invitation, liked what she saw and experienced, and several weeks later made a public profession of faith to her new Christ.

Her boyfriend of six years was suspicious, however. Cassandra now had new friends and he was jealous of all the talk about the pastor and Jesus. But one Sunday he too went to church, and later, he made a profession of faith.

Says the writer of this story, accepting Christ, making a profession of faith was the easy part. It took Cassandra and her boyfriend, Shawn, four years of struggle to figure out what it really meant to follow Christ. Shawn later said, "I had Christ in my heart but I had not made him Lord of my life." As they grew in their faith, they were married; it was the first Christian marriage in either of their immediate families.

Today the couple is financially self-sufficient. She works in the ministry that brought her into the church and Shawn is the general manager of a small business. The same living Christ who appeared to those doubtful disciples had taken hold of this couple's life.

It could happen. It often happens within the community we call the church.

Back to the movie. When waitress Yvonne finally accepted this was no hoax, that Charley was dead serious on sharing half the winnings, she said to him "Why are you doing this?"

Charley's reply is, "Because a promise is a promise."

All through the Old Testament we see the constant story of God's promises, ... even in spite of humanity's wayward unfaithfulness. The risen Christ with "skin on" is the embodiment of the new covenant: death has been defeated, and a new law of love has been established.

Why? Not only because a promise is a promise...but amazingly, that's the kind of God we have.

Finally, this. At the end of Jesus' conversation with his disciples, after he has proven he is alive and has explained how the scriptures have been fulfilled, he looked his disciples in the eye and said, "You are witnesses of these things."

Apparently, Jesus did not believe that seeing him and understanding what God had done was enough for the disciples. No, this story was to be shared with the world... more than observers, Jesus told his disciples, they were now witnesses.

So, maybe we understand the message of Easter that Jesus *was* and *is* alive. But we should be grabbed by the collar in what Jesus says about being witnesses... that is, it is not enough for you and me to merely experience Christ in our lives. Rather, this story, God's story — is to be shared. You are witnesses. You are not to keep this treasure for yourself. You are to share it.

So ponder what this means for us. Truth is, we are not always comfortable with the word witness. Perhaps we have had some off-putting experiences with people who wanted to *witness* their faith to us. It can feel *holier than thou* and uncomfortable, right?

So, our challenge, I believe, as new confirmands or as garden-variety Christians is to figure out a way to be a witness that feels authentic. Following Christ involves the way we live our lives, the way we treat others, the way we stand up for others or the way that is morally right.

But following Christ is *more* than that. It's being a witness. It's finding ways to tell our story, and the story of how Christ works in the church and in the world and doing it in a way that opens the door.

I know. It scares most Presbyterians to death. Because faith for us is so personal. But just because it's personal does not mean it's private.

Jesus says to those first disciples, you are witnesses.

He says it to you and me.

ⁱ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, No 2, p. 29.

ⁱⁱ S. Colglazier, "Finding a Faith That Makes Sense" Chalice Press, 1996, pp116-117.