

‘Are you still wondering?’ Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, April 26th, 2009

How are you feeling about Easter? Does it seem like yesterday or does it already seem a long time ago? Did Easter Day have any special significance to you this year because of things going on in your life, either especially sad or especially joyous? Or did Easter Day seem more of the same old same old? It came and it went without much impact. Today is the third Sunday of Easter. So I repeat my question: How are you feeling about Easter? As Christians, we are meant to be Easter people but how can we make sure that Easter has an impact on how we live our lives? To help us answer this, I’d like to take a look at the scriptures we have read this morning and in particular the place that wondering plays in them. Peter in Jerusalem asks the crowd marveling at the healing of the man lame from birth: ‘Why do you wonder at this?’ The risen Christ appears to his disciples as they are discussing reports of Jesus appearing to the women in the garden and to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Although much briefer than the Emmaus story, our resurrection story this morning has essentially the same form: the risen Christ appears, the disciples do not recognize him, they are reprimanded for doubting, food is shared, they respond in wonder and joy. Here, however, Jesus’ instructing of the disciples in their Hebrew Scriptures is delayed (vv.44-47) and becomes part of the commissioning. And crucially they have to move beyond wonder.

It is the commissioning that is the whole point of this resurrection appearance. That is why they have to stop wondering and get going. They have to get over their wondering and move on. What is it they have to move on to? Well, Luke is very clear, both in his gospel and in the second volume that he writes, the Acts of the Apostles. They have to move on to becoming apostles, that is, those who are sent out to proclaim their belief in the crucified and risen Christ and all that this entails. They are not allowed to wallow in fears or wondering. The spread of the good news is now in their hands and Jesus must ensure that they are prepared.

By the time we arrive at the event narrated in the first scripture we heard this morning, the previously doubtful Peter is then able to address the crowds after healing a crippled man. Himself transformed, he scolds them for a similar lack of faith: ‘You Israelites, why do you wonder at this ...?’ Our scriptures this morning testify to the power of faith in belief and practice. So we are asked: ‘Are you still wondering? Why? Don’t you trust in God’s power? Aren’t you ready to live believing in the redeeming power released through Christ’s death and resurrection?’

We might have sympathy with these disciples when we realize that they are not only wondering; they are frightened. In spite of the reports from the women, from the two disciples who came from Emmaus, and from Simon Peter, the apostles and others present think that they are seeing a ghost. In other words, they think they are encountering the dead not the living. Fear is the natural human response. It would be our response. I wonder if you ever watch *A Gulf Coast Journal* on PBS. This week’s episode included an item from Ca d’Zan at the Ringling Museum. It showed the curator, together with some mediums going through the rooms and experiencing coldness and other sensations

associated with ghosts. The whole episode centered on ghostly experiences. One person, in particular, reported being addressed by the ghost of John Ringling from the balcony of the courtroom. John Ringling's words were fierce and accusatory, telling this person, in no uncertain terms, to get out of his house. All such ghostly experiences, not that I've ever had any, are frightening.

By contrast, the resurrection appearances, as Luke and the other evangelists record them, are emphatically not about ghosts. They are not meant to leave people wondering and frightened about the dead. On the contrary, Jesus appears as the living, not because of some indestructible human spirit. No, Jesus died. He definitely died. As we say in our creed: 'He was crucified, dead, and buried'. But, the gospel teaches, God raised him from the dead. This is the central affirmation for believers. This is why it is so important that we heard our resurrection story this morning and other similar stories. Now, of course, Jesus' very palpable presence can lead to other questions and wonderings. As the Corinthian Christians asked Paul, we may ask: 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' (1 Cor 15:35). But Luke is not addressing general questions of resurrection here. Luke wants to say with his accent on the physicality of Jesus' presence that God has acted in a unique way in raising Jesus. You better believe it.

And just as we reflected last week, with the risen Jesus still bearing the wounds in his hands and side, the risen Christ who appears to our disciples in this morning's story is the same Jesus who died. This identification is critical, not just for theology but also for defining the nature of the Christian life. As we thought last week, those who follow Jesus, in the first century and the twenty-first century AD, are not ones who can ignore the cross, who can disengage from the troublesome issues of life in this world, claiming devotion to a spiritual, disembodied Christ. No, as in last week's gospel lesson, Luke draws attention to the scars in Jesus' body. Jesus says: 'Look at my hand and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' Easter is forever joined to Good Friday, and to follow the risen Christ is to follow the one who bore the cross.

In both of our readings, the Jewish scriptures are expounded. It is not simply prophecy and fulfillment. Again we are not left wondering, even in a positive sense of the word. 'Wow, fancy such and such a scripture coming true.' What Luke is stressing is that the gospel is in continuity with what God has been doing and planning in the Jewish Scriptures. Luke does not want us to sit here marveling at prophetic predictions. Indeed, it is not immediately obvious from the Jewish Scriptures that God's Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead. Only Jesus himself could open the minds of the disciples to the ways in which they bore witness to him. The commission of the disciples, like their instruction, was rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. 'Thus it is written' is the equivalent of saying: 'It has been God's plan all along.' In other words, the new is not new but the old properly interpreted. The appropriate response is not 'Wow; how clever of people to predict these things'. We must not get stuck in our wondering. Rather, our response should be to recognize God's plan as already set for in Scripture as constituting the charter of the Christian message. If we pay attention to scripture, then we see that the mission to all nations, that is to the whole world was God's plan from the beginning. It

was far from obvious to the early disciples and it is often far from obvious to us that God accepts from every background those who turn to him in response to a crucified Christ. As Jesus speaks to those gathered in this room in Jerusalem, he knows that they are not ready to preach a crucified and risen Messiah. And they are not ready to look favorably on an audience from all nations. They must wait then for the promise of power from God, the Holy Spirit. By the time of our reading from Acts this morning, they have waited fifty days, from Easter to Pentecost, a period filled with further experiences of the risen Christ, worship, and prayer. Luke tells of a power that comes at Pentecost, of a power that disturbs, that move Jesus' followers into activities in which they otherwise would not have engaged.

Easter is the spine-tingling answer – first to the early disciples and then to us and through them and us to the world. We are called apostles, sent out to tell the world that God's love has triumphed. God's love in Christ is unconquerable. It may be a good thing to wonder in one sense of the word. The hymn-writer, Charles Wesley, in his great hymn 'Love divine all loves excelling' speaks of how when we see God face to face we will be 'lost in wonder, love, and praise'. But in the other sense of the word, wondering is a bad thing. It's bad because it means that we get stuck gaping at something or pondering the validity of something. Perhaps you are still wondering whether the resurrection happened at all? If so, then it will be very difficult for you to commit to the Christian way of life. As with a friendship, it is only when you put your faith in someone, when you commit yourself to a relationship, that you can truly enjoy the friendship. Each Christian has to take steps of faith. The Christian faith is not a spectator sport. If you are always on the sidelines, then you are never part of the action. So I ask you this Eastertide: are you still wondering?

Did you notice something else that Jesus does to encourage these disbelieving and wondering disciples into faith? While they are still wondering, he says to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?'. As at the Lord's Table and as in the sharing of bread with the hungry of the world, Christ's presence is made known in eating. The extraordinary, the Divine, intersects with the ordinary, the earthly, daily tasks. Worship and witness, prayer and work – all are part of the same fabric for Christian mission. The bread of the Risen Christ at the altar leads us to sharing the bread of the earth with the hungry. We receive his Body in order to be his Body in the world. 'Have you anything here to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish.' Jesus eats this piece of broiled fish in their presence. This is further verification of his physical reality. It is another example of the continuity of the new life with the old. Through this simple mealtime gathering, the extraordinary Easter miracle is brought full circle in an ordinary human act – eating with friends.

Do we participate in this friendship between Christ and his disciples? When we come forward to the Lord's Table, do we spend time wondering about the nature of the ceremony or the method of receiving? If so, Jesus may ask us: 'Are you still wondering or are you truly sharing in my broken Body?' And when, at any point in our daily life, we are challenged to go out of our comfort zone in ministry to someone in need, do we waste time debating the wisdom of such a move, wondering whether we might get hurt. If so, Jesus

may ask us: ‘Are you still wondering?’ This past week, I was reading about a bishop in a British cathedral city. He was being criticized by some who called themselves Christians for the inclusivity of the gospel he proclaimed. I like the words he shared in response. I quote them to you now: ‘Faith is not a system that feeds our own needs for dependency and comfort, but a perspective on life which challenges us to see the positive beyond ourselves and our own limited focus.’ The Bishop of Lichfield further reminded his critics of part of the mission statement of his cathedral: ‘The transforming love of God offers a friendship and freedom which God has given the whole world to enjoy.’

From where does this Bishop draw authority for such an extensive claim? He draws it from the life and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the gospels. He gets the idea from the rest of the New Testament, especially from the Acts of the Apostles which describes the ever-widening circle of the apostles’ witness, beginning in Jerusalem, Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Whatever drew the crowds to Peter and John at Jerusalem’s Gate Beautiful - be it wonder, fear, curiosity, or amazement on hearing of healing miracles – they were challenged to make a far deeper response than they had expected. “‘Why do you wonder at this?’”, Peter asks the crowd, in his sermon, which speaks of another world, an Easter world, where the healing and forgiving power of God is as pervasive and present as sunshine and rain.... In the face of God’s deeds of mercy all around us, we are summoned not merely to say, “How wonderful!” but to turn around, to repent, to change our citizenship, and to become a faithful part of God’s work in the world.’¹

If we are to be members of God’s Easter people, each of us needs to hear the risen Jesus. We need to listen to him closely. As with the disciples in Jerusalem, he will address our chaos and confusion, our fear and frustration, guilt and grief, doubt and distrust, suspicion, despondency, and terror. He will not offer us explanations about the mechanics of resurrection or provide an itinerary of his whereabouts between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Instead, the risen Christ will speak peace, assuring us that he lives; teaching us to put our fear and doubts, even our wonder, in the context of God’s grand plan. He will open our understanding of the Scriptures and commission us as witnesses of all that God has done and is doing in the world – reconciling the world to himself. May we turn from our wondering and become credible, reliable, ready witnesses to all because of what we have seen and know.

¹ Thomas G. Long in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, 2008, Westminster John Knox Press, 410