

Easter 3 – Holy Wonder
April 22, 2012
Luke 24: 36-48

36 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ 37They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39Look at my hands 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.’ 40And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ 42They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, ‘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.’ 45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things.

Recently, a minister reminded me of a story from a novel I read in seminary years ago.

Author, John Updike, in “A Month Of Sundays”, tells the story of Clint Tidwell. Tidwell is the pastor of a church in a small Southern town, and one of his blessings -- and one of his curses -- is that the 80-year-old owner and still-active editor of the local newspaper is a member of his congregation. The blessing part is that this old journalist believes Tidwell to be one of the finest preachers around, and, wishing the whole town to benefit from this homiletical wisdom, he publishes a summary of Tidwell's Sunday sermon every Monday morning in the paper. The curse part is that this newspaperman, though well meaning, is a bit on the dotty and eccentric side, and Tidwell is often astonished to read the synopses of his sermons. The man owns the newspaper; nobody dares edit his columns, and the difference between what Tidwell thought he said and what the editor actually heard is often a source of profound amazement and embarrassment to Tidwell.

Tidwell's deepest amazement and embarrassment, however, came not when the newspaper editor misunderstood the Sunday sermon but, to the contrary, when he understood it all too sharply and clearly. It was early on the Monday morning after Easter, and Tidwell, in his bathrobe and slippers, was padding out the carport door to retrieve the Monday newspaper. The paper was lying at the end of the driveway, and, as Tidwell approached, he could see that the morning headline was in "second coming" sized type. What could it be? he wondered. Had war broken out somewhere? Had the local bank failed over the weekend? Had a cure for cancer been discovered? As he drew close enough to focus on the headline, he was startled to read the words, "Tidwell Claims Jesus Christ Rose From The Dead."

A red flush crept up Tidwell's neck. Yes, of course, he had claimed in yesterday's sermon that Christ rose from the dead, but golly, was that headline news? What would the neighbors think? I mean, you're supposed to say that on Easter, aren't you, that Christ rose from the dead, but that's not like saying that some person who died last week had risen from the grave, is it? Suddenly, as he looked at the screaming headline, what had been a routine Easter sermon had Tidwell feeling rather foolish.

<http://hydeparkchurch.com/blog>, April 19, 2012).

I believe it was just two short weeks ago that I preached “Jesus Christ Rose from the Dead!” I don’t recall it making the headlines. But why not – could there be better news? Why does war, economics, destruction and mayhem always get the front page? Maybe we just don’t know what to make of it. We are more likely to see “Jesus Christ Rose from the Dead” on the cover of a juicy tabloid, right next to the headline of yet another miracle weight loss drug. Which is it: A tabloid story or news that changes life as we know it?

The disciples thought it was an “idle tale.” That’s exactly what the Bible says. When the women went to the tomb on the third day the tomb was open. When they looked inside two dazzling angelic creatures told the women, “He is not here, he has risen.” These same creatures said to the women, “Remember how he told you...” this would happen? The women ran to the disciples to tell them what happened to them at the tomb but it all sounded like an “idle tale” and they didn’t believe.

I guess that is one thing you can do with news like that – toss it out like tabloid news.

Peter was the only one who made the slightest effort to investigate. He didn’t believe it – or did he? It was an idle tale – or was it? He had to check it out. So he ran to the tomb to see for himself the open tomb and the linen cloths. He was amazed, Luke reports, so amazed he went home. (I know that’s what I do when I’m amazed....)

Two followers of Jesus heard the news and they were troubled and confused. They had no idea what to make of it. “We had hoped...” they told the stranger that joined them on their way. It seemed highly unlikely that there was any truth to the news...but...what if it was true?

When these two disciples got to their home in Emmaus they invited the stranger join them for supper. It was too late to go on. Then, in a strangely familiar fashion, the stranger “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” Suddenly their eyes were opened. It was Jesus! Suddenly he was gone. Suddenly they knew the news was true. “Jesus rose from the dead!” They ran back to Jerusalem to find the disciples and tell them.

What do you do with news like that? Evidently, you talk it over. That’s what the disciples did as they sifted through the reports of the day trying to figure out what really happened to Jesus. When the women told them, it was easy to dismiss. When Peter went to the tomb, the possibility that something happened crept in. When two breathless followers pounded on the door with their story, the disciples started to wonder if it could possibly be true.

And that is where we find the disciples as we pick up the story for today. They’ve just read the headline, “Jesus Christ Rose from the Dead!” and they don’t know what to think or believe or do. They were somewhere between hopeful and skeptical, keeping their options open so as not to be disappointed.

In walks Jesus, only they aren’t sure if it is really Jesus or a ghost. Naturally, they are startled and terrified. Even after hearing all that news, seeing Jesus was a shock to the senses. Normally people do not rise from the dead. He held out his still wounded hands and feet and encouraged the disciples to see that he was real flesh and bone, not a ghost. Luke writes, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering...”

What a crazy mix of emotions: joy – doubt – wonder all tangled up together. Is it true? But how could it be true? Could it be? No. Yes. Maybe?

Jesus doesn't seem to be concerned that they don't have it all figured out. He opens their minds to scripture to help them understand how the path he walked is the path God established from the very beginning for all of us. The disciples walked this gospel path with Jesus. They watched him preach good news to the poor. They watched him give sight to the blind. They watched him bind up the broken-hearted. They watched him release those held hostage by oppression. They watched offer forgiveness and hope. They watched him stay true to that path even when a cross got in the way.

Jesus, wounded but alive, told his disciples – this story is not finished – it was theirs to continue. No obstacle, not even a cross, would stop them. “Jesus Christ Rose from the Dead” was the news they delivered. Some thought it was an idle tale – others wondered. But when people saw these same disciples preaching, teaching, healing, serving, sharing, and risking their lives – it seemed more believable.

This same news arrives each Easter – somewhere among the clutter of Easter grass and chirping chicks the news is told: “Jesus Christ Rose from the Dead.” But I'm not sure we know what to do with news like that. It is the biggest news of the Bible, but all we know to do is hide eggs, dress up as rabbits, and eat ham.

Is it possible that even today we, too, are in our joy disbelieving and still wondering?
When a child dies...don't we wonder?
When someone we love gets a diagnosis...don't we wonder?
When millions die of starvation...don't we wonder?
When violence comes to our neighborhood...don't we wonder?
When we are broken and desperate...don't we wonder?
When it seems like the cross won again...don't we wonder?
Is this big news just an idle tale?

And yet.....

Every time we refuse to cave in to despair... we know it's true!
And every time we deny the crosses of this world their ultimate victory...we know it's true!
And every time we do what Jesus did...we know it's true!
And every time we love as Jesus loved...we know it's true!
And every time we forgive as Jesus forgave...we know it's true!
And every time we press on rather than giving up...we know it's true!
And every time we believe something good can come out of destruction...we know it's true!
And every time we break bread together...we know it's true!

“Jesus Christ rose from the dead!” You can quote me on that! I know it is true – I have seen him!
As our youth so powerfully told us last week – we are His body. We are the proof! Now go and tell others what you have seen and heard!