

**While in Their Joy...**, a sermon in response to Luke 24:36b-48, 1 John 3:1-7, and Acts 3:12-19 by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, April 14, 2024 (B Easter 3).

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I am so glad to be back here with you all today! You know, when you have a week away after a really busy time, it gives you a chance to sort of reset and take stock of what's really going on. And it hit me... it's almost May! Weren't we just celebrating Christmas? And now, Easter is behind us! All of a sudden, it seems like 2024 is flying past. +++ One good thing about our *liturgical* year is that it helps us slow down a bit. – It helps us make sure to take the time to focus and experience Jesus' nativity – his baptism and temptation in the wilderness – his Transfiguration – arrest – crucifixion – and resurrection. Next will be the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Our journey ends each year having gone full circle, – proclaiming Christ the King, – before a *new* Advent wait, for a *new* incarnation of God... in Bethlehem. +++ That's the way it goes... at least it's **supposed** to go that way. But this year, I'll have to admit I'm feeling a little stuck... and, maybe you are too! This year, instead of a nice steady progression... a nice walk through discipleship... it has been more like: "Christmas... *Winter*... personal losses... wars going badly... *Ash Wednesday*... mass shootings... broken government... lots of rain... *and -boom- it's almost May.*" +++ So many other things are filling our minds, **Resurrection** isn't sinking in very fast. It's like my shields are up and the Good News is being deflected as much as it's getting in. +++ Maybe you're feeling that way, too. It's just been a hard Spring – *for all of us*.

That's what I like so much about today's gospel reading. It reminds us that we are in good company. **The disciples** are having a hard Spring, too. **Resurrection isn't sinking in very fast for them, either.** +++ This is Luke's version of the events covered by John last week – where "Doubting Thomas" earned his nickname. +++ Let's think about this moment they are in... First of all – let's make sure we're all clear about **when** Luke's narrative is taking place. It is still **Easter**. Just *this morning*, Mary Magdalene and the other women found the empty tomb. They rushed back and told the Apostles that Jesus had risen from the dead. "But," Luke tells us, "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and **they did not believe them.**" Now, later in the day, the eleven remaining disciples and their companions are still in Jerusalem – they are *afraid* – they don't know who they can trust. The events of the past few days were still so fresh... and raw... and burning. It's only been about 48 hours since Jesus suffered and died on the cross. +++ And just moments ago, two of their friends – other followers of Jesus who are not named – just rushed in to tell them an incredible story about Jesus appearing to them on the road to Emmaus... – and that somehow they had not even **recognized** him until they stopped to eat and he broke bread. Then, in the two verses just before today's reading, the disciples had been **crying out with excitement**, "***The Lord has risen indeed!***" because Simon Peter had seen him. +++

*So, let's not be tempted to think that Jesus totally catches them by surprise when he appears to them all. In fact, today's reading makes it clear: "**While they were talking about this.**" They are actually **talking** about Jesus' return **at the very moment** when he appears, standing among them... And **they still aren't convinced!** +++ "They were **startled...** and **terrified...** and thought that they were seeing a ghost." +++ And what does Jesus do to dispel their skepticism – and to calm their hearts? Does come right out and say, "Hey guys, it's me, Jesus, back from the dead?" ... No, he doesn't. ... Does he point out his familiar face – maybe turn profile for a better look, and say, "Look at me, have you already forgotten this beautiful face?" +++ No. +++ The first thing Jesus does is show them his broken and disfigured hands and feet – the unhealed wounds that still tell the story of his violent death. +++ "**Look** at my hands and my feet; **see** that it is I," he says. **They see** his wounds. **They touch** him. +++ And then, Jesus asks for food. They feed him. He eats in their presence. +++ +++ This is an important moment, as the disciples – and we – prepare to become witnesses for the risen Christ to the world. ... Since Easter, we know our Savior because of the cross. **Jesus' injuries – the scars of Calvary** – will forever be a central part of his identity as our resurrected Lord. +++ +++ In her 1994 book called *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Nancy Eiesland emphasizes how important it is that Jesus came back to life with his body visibly broken: "The **foundation of Christian theology** is the resurrection of Jesus Christ..." she writes. "Yet **[today,]** seldom is the resurrected Christ recognized as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment." But it is only through "presenting his **impaired** body to his startled friends," Eiesland continues, "the resurrected Jesus is [truly*

revealed] ... revealed as the *disabled God*.” +++ ... +++ One of my favorite songs to use on Good Friday is Gillian Welch’s haunting, “By the Mark,” where she reflects this way of identifying Jesus by his brokenness: “When I cross over, I will shout and sing. I will know my Savior by the mark where the nails have been... By the mark where the nails have been, by the sign upon His precious skin, I will know my Savior when I come to Him by the mark where the nails have been.”

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Luke tells us the fullness of what is actually... happening... finally begins to break through to the disciples *when Christ shows them his broken body*: “While in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering.” That’s like saying “it’s too good to be true.” ... “While in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering.”... They still **do not understand** what has happened, or why... They don’t know just yet how it all fits into God’s plan. But they know that their friend and teacher..., their Lord and Messiah..., Jesus Christ, has returned from the grave – **and he is actually standing right there in front of them**. It’s one of those moments when the stinging, painful, reality of your past comes crashing down upon you, yet somehow at the same time it creates new and bewildering realities for the present – and new possibilities for the future. – **It’s the kind of paradoxical moment when you are overwhelmed but you also cannot look away.** +++ Then, to satisfy any lingering doubts, Jesus tells them he is hungry. “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.” +++ Ghosts don’t grow hungry. +++ Corpses don’t eat.

“While in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering.” +++ “It’s too good to be true.” +++ It’s not exactly the Easter message we *prefer* to celebrate, is it? ...A broken savior? ...Doubt? ...A hungry God? ...But I think **we** can appreciate what the disciples are feeling, can’t we? +++ >>> Do **YOU** ever have moments of thrilling clarity followed by times of doubt? ...Do **you** feel Christ so close you could touch him, only to realize you have no idea what it all means? +++ **Do you ever wonder:** – “If the gift of resurrection – if the gift of salvation – is so overwhelmingly wonderful – **why am I still broken?** Why does life overwhelm me with unfulfilled dreams – with broken relationships – with impossible circumstances?” +++ Today’s **Good News** is that you are called to Jesus Christ; – called to him... not **despite** your brokenness. ... NO! ... **You are called to a savior who shares your brokenness.** +++ “How do you know your savior when you come to him? By the mark where the nails have been!” +++ Your savior has scars – **like you**... Your savior carries baggage – **like you**... Your savior is not immune to pain – or to suffering. +++ **Your savior lives! – Tangibly, – viscerally, – he lives!!** +++

And then, when the disciples recover from their own *disbelieving joy* – from their *disorienting fear* – they are finally ready to be Jesus’ witnesses to the world. >>> See, I think that’s how we are most like Jesus’ original Apostles:... Only when **you** can get **your** hands around... Jesus’ deep connection... to **your... own**... woundedness – your... misshapen ...disfigurements..., – only when you grasp that he’s been there himself..., - only **then** are you ready to understand what he really has to offer you. And to offer the world. +++

Today’s reading from 1<sup>st</sup> John spells it out for us: this Jesus with the scars and wounds – ...the Jesus who is hungry and vulnerable – ...the Jesus who was never understood... except... by... revealing... the **strength of his weakness**... +++ The **STRENGTH ... of his ... weakness**... +++ **That** Jesus is the one who’s image we inherit ...– **That** is the Jesus for whom we witness: “**See what love the Father has given us, that we ... WE ... should be called children of God; and that is what we are.** The reason the world does not know **us** is that it did not know **him**. <sup>2</sup>Beloved, **WE** are God’s children **NOW**; what we **will be** has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: **when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.** <sup>3</sup>And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” +++ ... +++ My friend, you don’t have to pretend to be perfect. – **You don’t even need to be okay** – to be a valid witness of Jesus Christ. – ... – You don’t have to have it all together – because your **brokenness** is fed, nourished, and endorsed by the brokenness of your savior.

As Luke’s gospel draws to a close, transitioning at the end of this chapter to the Acts of the Apostles and the beginning of the Church, Christ gives his disciples a new vocation. His broken presence transforms them for the work ahead. And only now are they ready to understand the **whole** story. Jesus explains everything written **about him** in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms – and how it all must be fulfilled. **He opens their minds to**

**understand it ALL: not just a few prophecies in Isaiah about a child being born and a son given.** – Jesus explains the **entire** Hebrew Scriptures, as only he can. +++ Now, we don't know exactly **which** texts Jesus talked about, or what he said about them, but the disciples are totally **transformed** by the experience. Take Peter, for example, ... Peter..., *who so far has been a combination of bumbling over-enthusiasm and fear as much as anything else....* This is the end of Luke's gospel, but Luke picks the story right back up again in Acts. And *there...*, by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter..., this same **Peter** is baptizing the first converts to this new religion... He is preaching to the Jews – even **explaining...** what David had expected in the Messiah..., **quoting** the prophet Joel..., and **explaining** how Christ's crucifixion and resurrection fulfills the Hebrew Scriptures... Then, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of Acts, **Peter heals** a crippled beggar in the name of Jesus Christ, and – in our scripture reading this morning, still in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Acts, – **Peter** reflects the very compassion, wisdom, and forgiveness of Christ *himself*, speaking to the very Jews who had demanded Jesus' execution: "And now, friends I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets..., that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out." +++ Is this the same Peter who denied Jesus? – The one who jumped out of the boat to swim to shore when he saw Christ on the sea bank? Is this the same Peter who naively swore he'd never let anyone hurt Jesus? **Jesus has opened Peter's mind** – he has **TRANSFORMED** and **EMPOWERED** Peter to **become**... the... **ROCK**... on which Christ's church would be built. +++ The role Jesus had set aside for him when they first met.

Time after time, throughout all 4 gospels, the 12 have consistently failed to understand what Jesus is saying, or what he is doing. **But now**, here at the end of their time together, when Christ opens their minds, suddenly, everything they had experienced with him over the past several years **makes sense**: – the healing... forgiveness... prayer... feeding... teaching... peacefulness... driving out demons... even Jesus' uncanny **charisma**. – And the list goes on. +++ And, – now that their minds have been opened... **there's work to be done**... +++ Jesus tells them: "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to **ALL nations**, beginning" **there ... that day ... by them ... in Jerusalem**. The message of salvation is for Jews **and** Gentiles – it is for **everyone**, *throughout the world*... By the end of **his** own worldly ministry, though, Jesus himself had really only reached out to Jews in Palestine, with just a few exceptions... How will the message spread now that he is gone? +++ **These flawed and damaged "witnesses,"** – indeed, all who will become followers of Christ must take up the job.

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Now, some two thousand years later, **we** have inherited the movement started that day at the command of Christ himself – on the very day of his resurrection... And, like the original disciples, **we** are making **our** way through this time after Easter the best **we** can – **trying** to make sense of the terrible events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. +++ **We are trying** to find our voice for Christ through our own wounds – our own scars – and our own failures. **Trying** to find our voice for **peace** in a world enamored with violence and war. +++ **Trying** to find our voice for **justice** in a cold world that craves power. +++ "By the mark" of the nails on Jesus' hands and feet, **you** are called to a messy discipleship... **you** are called as a witness for a savior who isn't always pretty... for a savior who gets his hands dirty in sacrifice and service. +++ **You** are called as a witness for a savior who understands suffering because he has suffered.

My friends, as we renew **our** mission and ministry in the coming weeks and months – let us pray that all of our steps are forwards. Let us watch and listen as the Holy Spirit lays upon us a renewed sense of strength and mission to serve our community... and our world. +++ And know, my friends, that **the Risen Christ is in-person here, among us this morning, also. ... Let us** not be terrified – as though we are seeing a ghost!! **While in our joy and wondering – may we recognize him – may we touch his hands and feet. May we feed him.** +++ **May we** open our minds to his words and bear witnesses, proclaiming the Risen Christ to all nations... beginning in Mendham. +++ **You**... are... **witnesses**... to these things.

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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen