

Joyful Disbelief  
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Acts 3:1-16  
Luke 24:36b-48

A connecting line between both our readings today is this statement: “You are witnesses.” “We are witnesses.”

The scriptures give us good news of life after death, and of healing after a lifetime of passive begging. But *how can we* be witnesses to such things? We are not firsthand witnesses. If anything, we are glancing over the shoulder of the author of Luke and Acts— these two books were written by the same author. *If* we are witnesses, then it is second hand, or more likely many more hands removed than that. How can we receive these scriptures as something more than mere words, but as something that we, too, can bear witness to?

That’s what these scriptures ask of us. They ask that we move from words to witness. From tending our own terror and doubt, to tending others: their bodies and their hunger. These scriptures ask us to move from fear into openness, and maybe even understanding. So, how do we get there?

This is the third Sunday when we hear tell of Jesus’ astonishing resurrection appearances. First, we have Easter Sunday, when the two Marys and Salome discovered the empty tomb and the announcement that Jesus had risen. Then, Jesus appeared to many of the disciples who were hiding in a locked room, and a week later to Thomas. In Luke’s telling, Jesus appeared, announcing peace— their response? Startled, terrified, and convinced they were seeing a ghost. Jesus offers to let them touch and feel his body— ghosts don’t have bodies, I think we are supposed to believe. Still, they have a mixture of joy, and disbelief, and wondering. They have not yet reached certainty, and Luke’s gospel ends before we find out if anyone is truly convinced that this astonishing thing has happened.

And yet, that doesn't really matter to Jesus, it seems. In the moment, he is more concerned about food. Jesus announced that he is hungry. "Do you have anything to eat?" he asked them.

So the disciples put their disbelief on hold, and they set about making Jesus some broiled fish and served it to him. In the ancient middle east, and even still there today, the act of hospitality— providing someone something to eat when they are hungry— is second nature. I remember when I traveled there on a study trip to meet with groups that were working on peace and justice, it was rare that my bottom touched the seat of the conference room before a tray with coffee and sweets was whisked before me.

And so I can imagine how Jesus' request for food finally moved the disciples from their stunned paralysis. Believe in the resurrection? That's a tough one. But give the hungry body before me some food? I can do that. And it is that very action that moved Jesus' followers from their fear, into a place of openness and understanding.

I have noticed that when I am caught in an endless loop of anxiety or fear, that if I can get out into the community, and feed others, or lobby for the ending of hunger, or something that is beyond the ruminations of my mind, the energy of my own anxiety shifts into something more productive, and I no longer feel trapped by it.

Christ moves us from Fear to Openness, unbound by notions of what can and cannot be done. The scripture says that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." Here Jesus is just repeating what he had been teaching them before his death and resurrection— this isn't new material— but up to that point, they had not been able to truly grasp its meaning. Luke doesn't let us know in this gospel how they respond either. But in the book of Acts— which was written by the same author as Luke's gospel, and can be considered a continuation of Luke— we see that the disciples had moved from fear, to action. They were living as witnesses to what Jesus taught, letting their joy bubble out to those beyond their own circle of care.

We see this in how Peter and John tended to the body of the man who waited at the Beautiful Gate to the temple. This man, who was lame from birth, was carried each day to the gate where he would lie and beg for alms. Peter and John said to him, “we have no silver or gold, but here is what we give you: ‘In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk!’” And, the man stood. He walked. And then, he began leaping and praising God.

How is that for joy? Everyone who saw him was filled with wonder and astonishment. Now, here is a miracle that is almost as equally astonishing as the resurrection. And we all know people we love who we would pray for healing, maybe you need healing for yourself in your own body, and that healing will just not come. Healing passages like these seem unfair to those who will not get similar miracles.

But I ask that you allow yourself to let your disbelief intermingle with the joy that is in this story. A man who could not walk is leaping! And I think this story tells us that we can tend to our disbelief. We can tend to our terror and we can tend to our doubt. If that is what we tend to, then surely we will find more of it. But the disciples who had been witnesses to what Jesus had done instead tended to a body in need, just as Jesus had taught them in his healing in others, and later when Jesus asked them to tend to his hunger. Oriented in such a way, the disciples were able to access a power that was beyond belief, perhaps, but not beyond joy.

My family and I had a wonderful Spring Break vacation to Chicago, where Chris and I lived for 8 years before moving to Leonia, and where our daughter spent the first 4 years of her life. More specifically, we were in the first suburb west of Chicago: Oak Park. We hadn't been back in more than five years, so in addition to catching up with beloved friends and godparents there, we walked everywhere, taking note of what remained familiar, and what had changed. We visited the library, some favorite playgrounds, our old house, and our old church. One thing we noticed right away was that strangers said hello to us. And also, at many of the intersections of the pedestrian traffic shopping areas, there were people quietly sitting, with boxes of chocolates they tried to sell. We learned that these were Venezuelan migrants.

Last fall, the Chicago shelters had been maxed out, overflowing with need from the buses of migrants being shipped from Texas and other southern border towns. In the Chicago neighborhood of Austin, which borders the first suburb west of Chicago, Oak Park, there were 160 migrants who were gathered in tents outside the police precinct, since there was no space for them in the shelters. It was Halloween, and like several Chicago Halloweens I remember, it was snowy and wet.

Some Oak Park residents decided that this would not do. “People will die,” they said— and indeed, this was a valid fear, as just 6 weeks later a 5 year old Venezuelan child died in Chicago, of sepsis after contracting COVID, Strep, and Adenovirus while sheltering in a converted manufacturing warehouse that sometimes reached freezing temperatures. These Oak Parkers didn’t want to become witnesses to such a loss happening so close to them. And so, they brought the migrants even closer: they showed up with their minivans and their SUVs. And these suburban neighbors carried 160 migrants by the carload the mile from the Austin Police Precinct, into Oak Park. They brought them to the Village Hall, and *demande*d that their government come up with safe emergency housing for these new neighbors. It was chaotic! The Village government did not expect these new neighbors; they did not have a plan or a budget. But their own residents forced their hand, and quickly arrangements were made that provided housing in local churches, as well as the YMCA and a hotel. Some residents even brought migrants into their homes. This worked as the short term, emergency solution. But in the longer term, grants were secured, and plans were drawn that would bring the migrants to longer term shelter, procuring work permits, enrolling their children in local schools, and eventually finding access to low-rent apartments. If any of that sounds easy, let me tell you there were screaming matches in board meetings, and lots of hand-wringing over a shifting village budget. But for the most part, people agreed that it was a sacrifice for the village and its residents, **and** it was also the right thing to do.

The Community of Congregations— churches and synagogues and other religious groups, which had already been working together for years to address food insecurity and homelessness in the village— sprung into leadership to help the village find a way to make this heavy lift of hospitality work.

One Japanese American resident, Mika Yamamoto, invited a family into her home. With the help of Google Translate, she learned more about the migrants' journey:

"They walked for nine months through nine countries," she said. "Parts of it, they were on a train, and when I say 'on a train,' they were on top of the train. They showed me videos of that and talked about walking through the jungle. It's unfathomable."

Indeed, it is unbelievable what people experience in a world of misuse of power, violence, and greed. But when we become witnesses, we are people who get called into action. We move beyond the realm of doubt in what can be done, to people who work with God's power to make real transformation happen. When we tend to the bodies God puts in our midst, rather than tend to our own fears, then the power of resurrection becomes ours as well. Even though our minds may still snag on our disbelief, we get a taste of the joy the risen Christ wants for our lives.