

April 15

I think Dolly Parton said it best in her role as hairdresser Truvy Jones in the 1989 classic movie, "Steel Magnolias," when she said, "*Laughter through tears is my favorite emotion.*" I think that captures a bit of the first Easter. The first experience of Jesus' resurrection.

I've said it for three weeks running now, that the most prominent feeling we have evidence of on that first Easter, the day of Jesus' resurrection in real time, was confusion. I call it confusion because it was a mix of sad, happy, and afraid at best.

We're still in the season of Easter which extends past the day of resurrection and through the celebration of the giving of the Holy Spirit. The impact and the power of the resurrection took time to settle in for even the closest of the disciples. So, we're taking our time soaking in the confusion and the beauty of the resurrection.

Today we're going to hear about Jesus's appearance to the disciples on what we would call Easter evening, from Luke's gospel. It's the same evening that we heard about from John's gospel last Sunday, but just from Luke's perspective. There are many similarities, but the focus remains more on the group and doesn't zero in on an individual like John does. So, Thomas is not highlighted, but doubt still is.

Let's hear how Luke tells us about this encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus...

Luke 24:36b-48

³⁶ *While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"* ³⁷ *They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were seeing a ghost.*

³⁸ *He said to them, "Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts?"* ³⁹ *Look at my hands and my feet. It's really me! Touch me and see, for a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones like you see I have.*" ⁴⁰ *As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet.* ⁴¹ *Because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, he said to them, "Do you have anything to eat?"* ⁴² *They gave him a piece of baked fish.* ⁴³ *Taking it, he ate it in front of them.*

⁴⁴ *Jesus 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 from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled."* ⁴⁵ *Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.* ⁴⁶ *He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,* ⁴⁷ *and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.* ⁴⁸ *You are witnesses of these things.*

When we slow down and experience life in the pages of the Bible, when we really inhabit the white spaces between the words and the lines and live Bible life at the same speed as we must each live our actual lives, I find that we meet Jesus and the disciples and others in a much more real way.

It's possible that I think this way because of my exposure to the 1981 classic (or maybe I was the only one who watched in in Sunday school or wherever I saw it) Super Book – a cartoon where the super book, the Bible, was mysteriously imported into a computer and a boy, a girl, their dog and their robot friend would get sucked into Bible stories where they tried to help people they encounter in all of our favorites.

They adventured back in time where roads were dirt and clothes were very drape-y. I cannot imagine a world with no elastic. And really, don't we all do that? We read the Bible and we mentally transport ourselves into olden times where things were all sepia tone and a little yellowed around the edges? We see the external differences in technology like the lack of elastic, snaps and zippers, and we assume that the internal lives of people who came before us were old timey and less complicated, nuanced and/or dramatic than our inner lives.

One of the most worthwhile things we can do to get to know Jesus and to understand what the Bible has to teach us is to step into the moods, hearts, and minds of the people we encounter there. They had the same basic realities that we have – the need for physical, emotional, mental and spiritual connection and health. They struggled with relationships, health, money, and survival.

So, these people who were really not very different from us even though we know the wonders of internal plumbing, elastic and the internet, when they see Jesus who didn't stay dead, they reacted like anyone might react. They were at least a little and maybe a lot afraid that they were seeing a ghost. Seeing Jesus in that particular moment might have been equal parts cool and creepy or both comforting and disconcerting.

Encountering Jesus in the course of our daily life can be a similar experience. It can be hard to trust what our heart or gut is telling us about our encounter. And while we don't have the Risen Jesus physically with us at this time so that we can investigate his wounds or hear his voice or watch him eat food, we can learn to trust our experience of the right-now presence of God with Us by checking our experiences with those who encountered Jesus in scripture and by talking with others in our lives who have clearly seen God.

And we might be wondering why this kind of assessment of encounter with the Risen Lord is even important. The short answer is that it's important because God indicates that it's important. Our entire faith – trusting, praying, worshiping, giving, loving not just those who love us but loving our enemy – all the behaviors that are the fruit of our faith in Jesus are built on the reality of a resurrected Lord who lives and reigns at the right hand of God the Father and is coming back one day.

If our whole hope is built on being in a right relationship with God for now and for eternity, then it matters if God actually raised Jesus from the dead. It matters how life is different after the resurrection because we are not simply sharers of information and rules for living, but witnesses to the victory of Jesus over death itself.

And here's the deal. Life is messy. Laughter through tears is a great emotion. Or as Luke tells us the disciples were feeling that evening, wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, is a relatable feeling. Life isn't cut and dried, all or nothing. Life is not go big or go home. Sometimes life is happy, sad, loud, hard, quiet, gentle and it's not abnormal to be all of that all in one day.

And in walks Jesus. Jesus walks into our happy/sad, productive/procrastinating, calm/anxious reality and simply is alive. That's the basic truth of the resurrection. Jesus walks into our midst even if the house is a mess and we're serving Pop Tarts for dinner because that's just the kind of day it's been. Jesus walks into our midst if we've put together a spread worthy of Martha Stewart. And Jesus will walk on in even if our life is more like a Martha Stewart table setting where Pop Tarts are being served or fancy food on paper plates.

And while we're a little freaked out to see Jesus show up unexpected (not unwelcomed, but catching us a little by surprise) because Jesus is an important guest we might find that we're like the disciples in that room. In the middle of our living room rather than the sanctuary of the church maybe Jesus seems a little too alive. And maybe we're a little unsure exactly what to do with the very alive Jesus who shows up. Do we get fancy and pretend like his presence makes complete sense to us and we've got our act together, or do we just sit around exactly as we were lounging and invite him to join in?

It takes time to figure out how to welcome the living Lord Jesus into our daily lives and be comfortable serving him Pop Tarts on fine china – sharing the reality of our topsy-turvy inner lives and then breaking out of the routine of our days and sometimes our daze, d-a-z-e, after he joins in our meal, our offering of real life, and living differently.

That's the other aspect of Jesus' visit with his disciples that evening. Jesus meets them where they are. That's one of the messages of the Risen Jesus is that he will find the disciples where they are waiting and not that he's going to be only in one place and they have to come to Him. And Jesus is still doing that today – Jesus meets us where we are, and Jesus does life with us just like Jesus ate the baked fish in front of them. Jesus takes the time to show himself to be real and true and present.

But after the reality of Jesus settles in a bit, he doesn't tell them that he's moving in. Jesus tells them that they are witnesses. They witnessed his miracles, they watched him cast out demons, he watched multitudes fed from a few loaves and a few small fish, they witnessed his suffering, death and resurrection.

And along with a supernatural, Spirit breathed gift of understanding the scriptures, Jesus sits there in that room with his disciples as they look on with what I can only imagine are eyes wide open (you know the look...chin down, eyebrows up, a mix of disbelief and full-belief all at once) and Jesus tells them that because they have seen him, because they have seen miracles, because they are witnesses, they have the responsibility to bear witness to him so that others might know him and be reconciled to God like they have been.

In Matthew Jesus gives the same basic instructions in what we call The Great Commission. But The Great Commission feels so big and it feels so churchy. What I want us to ponder today is not the bigness of the work Jesus laid on the disciples that day, but on the simple, intimate way in which Jesus invited everyday people who had a certain set of experiences to just not stay quiet about it.

Hear Jesus again, but not from a pulpit or a mountaintop, hear Jesus speak to all of us who have seen the Lord, who have heard the teachings, who have experienced the miracles. Let's hear how he guides our next steps.

⁴⁴ Jesus 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 from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. ⁴⁶ He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

The Great Commission can be carried out by institutions, but Jesus did not tell that room full of folks to start a church or to start The Church. He just looked them in the eyes and told them to tell his story. Tell the story of the scriptures proven true. Jesus was just

killed by the institution that the people of God had become. Jesus didn't tell his beloved disciples to go start a new religious body. He told his people, while they are still feeling doubt through happiness, to tell about the change that is possible and the forgiveness that is being offered. It was not to the fancy folks he said this. He was talking to people who have sat eye to eye with Jesus in their living room and loved him over Pop Tarts and paper plates.

I'm just a farm girl who fell in love with Jesus in Sunday school as a child, at VBS each summer, and through the words of life contained in the Bible and the relationships of nurture (not to be confused with perfection) through her local church. I am just a sinner made saint by the blood of Jesus, yet here I am loving God, loving you and bearing witness to the wonderful things he has done, is doing, and will do.

Is there anyone in your life you really wish would connect with Jesus? Have you prayed for them? Have you told them more than 'you really need to go to church'? Have you told them the Pop Tarts and paper plates, nitty-gritty truth of what you have seen and heard of God? If not, my prayer today is that the very same Spirit that Jesus breathed on those disciples – fish breath and all – would breathe right into your own soul to help you see the miracles, the provisions, the promises fulfilled in a way that you can be a part of telling all the nations about this great and wonderful gift.

Let us pray...