

Sermon – Joy, Disbelief and Wonder
Scripture Readings – Psalm 4, Luke 24:36-48
Sunday, April 15, 2018
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Springfield, Illinois

Our first Scripture reading, Psalm 4, affirms the God who gives us “room” when we are in distress, a timely validation following last week’s gospel reading where we found the disciples hiding in a room behind closed doors; and a reminder to all of us, during times of distress and betrayal, to seek God’s face, to keep silent and to remain resolute at doing what is right. This is possible because of one’s confidence in the character, strength and reliability of God. Hear now a reading from Holy scripture.

- ¹ Answer me when I call, O God of my right!
You gave me room when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.*
- ² How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?
How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?*
- ³ But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.*
- ⁴ When you are disturbed,^[a] do not sin;
ponder it on your beds, and be silent.*
- ⁵ Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.*
- ⁶ There are many who say, “O that we might see some good!
Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!”*
- ⁷ You have put gladness in my heart
more than when their grain and wine abound.*
- ⁸ I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.*

The second scripture reading is Luke 24:36-48. Today’s narrative is unique to Luke and follows the discovery of the empty tomb and the encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. As the eleven disciples are discussing this news, Jesus appears to them. Hear now the witness of scripture.

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”^[a] ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look 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.” ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.^[b] ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and 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.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah^[c] is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses^[d] of these things. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Joy, Disbelief and Wonder”

The text: While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering...” Luke 24:41

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, give us the disbelieving joy and wonder of faith in you that we may be witnesses to our Risen Lord by living compassionate and humble lives. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

George Weigel, Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington D.C., recently wrote a piece in the Wall Street Journal which Mary Caroline and David Mitchell shared with me last week. The article is entitled “The Easter Effect and How It Changed the World” and I would like to highlight a few of Dr. Weigel’s insights this morning.

His first observation is that Christians accounted for between a quarter and a half of the population within the Roman Empire by the early 4th century. Part of the reason converts were drawn to Christianity, according to sociologist Professor Rodney Stark of Baylor University, was that Christians modeled a nobler way of life than offered elsewhere in the rather brutal Roman society. Women were respected as they were not in classical culture and played a critical role in bringing others to faith. In an age of plagues, the readiness of Christians to care for the sick, not just their own, was a factor as was the impressive witness to faith by many martyrs.

One may wonder what was the incentive for such a compelling, alternative way of life? According to George Weigel, there is no accounting for the rise of Christianity without weighing the revolutionary effect of the Resurrection: the encounter early believers had with the Risen Lord, whom they first knew as the itinerant Jewish rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, and who died an agonizing and shameful death on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem. As Anglican Bishop and New Testament Scholar, N.T. Wright makes clear, that first generation answered the question of why they were the People of the Way with a straightforward answer: because Jesus was raised from the dead.

Simply put, it all began with the joy, disbelief and wonder of the resurrection! Comprehending the resurrection was no less challenging two millennia ago than it is today. The New Testament accounts of Easter carefully preserve the memory of the first believers’ bafflement, skepticism and even fright about what had happened to their former teacher and what was happening to them.

As Luke records in chapter 24 Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them are the first to encounter the empty tomb. When they tell the disciples, “these words seem to them an idle tale and they did not believe.” The two men who met the Risen Christ that afternoon on the road to Emmaus, who recognize him only in the breaking of the bread, run back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. While the disciples are talking about these strange events and Peter’s report which confirmed what the women told them, that the tomb was indeed empty, “Jesus himself stood among them...and they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a ghost.”

The remarkable and deliberate recording of disbelief of what they insisted was the bottom line of their faith is refreshingly honest and teaches us two things. First, it tells us that the early Christians were confident enough about what they called the Resurrection that they were prepared to say, “I know this sounds ridiculous, but it’s what happened.” Second, it took time

for the first Christians to understand what the events of Easter meant—not only for Jesus but for themselves.

As they worked that out, their thinking about a lot of things changed profoundly. *The way they thought about time and history changed.* During Jesus' public ministry, many of his followers shared in the Jewish messianic expectations of the time: God would liberate Israel from their oppressors and bring a new age in which nations would stream to the mountain of the Lord and history would end. The early Christians came to understand the catastrophic, world-redeeming act that God promised had taken place on Easter.

God's kingdom had come not at the end of time but within time—and that had changed the texture of both time and history. History continued, however those shaped by the Easter Effect became the people who understood how history was going to turn out...that in the end good overcomes evil because that is what they witnessed in the resurrection...with joy, disbelief and wonder. They also learned from their Risen Lord that the kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught about this kingdom before conquering death by dying on a cross. They realized this kingdom is not waiting for us at the end of time, this is a kingdom whose gates are open to us now if we choose to enter. Because of that, they could live differently. The Easter Effect impelled them to bring a new standard of equality into the world...to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly. The Easter Effect impelled them to embrace death as martyrs if necessary—because they knew, now, that death did not have the final word in the human story, that the love of God could not be contained in a tomb.

Without the Easter Effect, there is really no explaining why Christianity transformed the Roman Empire with a nobler way of life and respect for one another. That effect begins with and is incomprehensible without the first Christians' conviction that "Jesus of Nazareth was raised in body and spirit, three days after his execution." This does not end the mystery of Easter. Neither does this mean there is not still work to be done in history, work to live a nobler way of life and to bring a new standard of equality into our world.

Today we gather, as did the disciples, to give thanks for the Easter Effect: the joy, disbelief and wonder of something inexplicable but nonetheless true; something that gives us an abundance of meaning to life and that erases our fear of death; something that we have to share; something with which we can change the world.

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

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