

Sermon – Disbelieving Joy
Scripture Readings – Psalm 4, Luke 24:36-48
Sunday, April 18, 2021
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D. Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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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 God has set apart the faithful for God’s self; God hears when I call to God.

⁴ When you are disturbed, 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. Amen.

The second scripture reading is Luke 24:36-48. Today’s narrative is Luke’s witness to the disciples gathered in the room behind closed doors. It follows the women’s discovery of the empty tomb and the two travelers’ encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. As the eleven disciples and their companions are discussing this news, Jesus appears to them. Listen now to the witness of scripture.

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 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. 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^h 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Disbelieving Joy”

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

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 lives of compassion and integrity. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Three years ago I had an encounter during a family reunion at the Boulder’s Resort on the coast of Rhode Island that took me a little by surprise. It was in a conversation with some warm, positive and inquisitive friends of the extended family whom I had just met. They were interested in my experience as a woman pastor and the challenges and roadblocks I encountered along the way.

I shared the disbelieving joy I experienced upon receiving the call to serve such a large, vibrant congregation as Westminster in Illinois’ Capitol City. I also talked frankly about some of the heart to heart conversations I had on this journey in the middle of the night when I was feeling disrespected or diminished ... asking God to answer me when I call and to give me the room I needed when I was in distress so that I could keep silent and remain resolute to doing what is right, much like the psalm we read today.

There seemed to be a positive connection between us and they communicated an admiration as I spoke about my experience. Then they asked me a question that was totally unanticipated: *You don’t really believe in the resurrection, do you?* I was not as articulate as I would like to think I could have been. My response was not unexpected by our son Paul who was sitting next to me at the time. *Yes, I said, of course I believe in the resurrection.*

Once the words came out of my mouth, the mood and tenor of the conversation totally changed. They seemed as surprised by my answer as I was by their question. The admiration I was feeling vanished as quickly as Christ did on the Road to Emmaus. It was somewhat unsettling and we quickly moved into another conversation without acknowledging the discomfort.

Later that night behind closed doors, Peter, Paul and I spoke of the experience with a little humor, wonder, and disbelief as to how I could dedicate my life to the Church without believing in the resurrection and the Risen Christ.

One can never underestimate the power of the resurrection in transforming the lives of those who believe. 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.

The disciples are just beginning to grasp the news they heard first from the women who visited the empty tomb earlier that day and now from the two travelers who met the Risen Christ on their way to Emmaus, when Jesus stands in their midst. They are terrified, overjoyed, and cannot believe their eyes when they find themselves in the presence of the Resurrected One who bears the wounds of crucifixion.

The Risen Christ reminds them ‘that everything written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opens their minds to understand the scriptures; first, by evoking the Exodus story of a God who sees, knows and experiences the suffering of oppression and summons Moses to liberate an enslaved people; then, by referencing the poetry of Isaiah about a servant who suffers unjustly, but whose suffering awakens others, empowering them to embody justice before God and one another. Indeed, throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus interpreted his own story in light of this suffering God who enters into the enslavements of the world in order to bring liberation and to awaken people to the divine will for justice in our common life. (*Looking into the Lectionary*, Rev. Dr. Roger Gench)

The resurrection of the suffering servant, the cause for disbelieving joy, is at the heart of our faith and reveals what we believe about the character, strength and reliability of God. God is the God of resurrection, revival, renaissance, rebirth, restoration, and renewal. God is the God of forgiveness, healing, second chances, new beginnings, the ability to change, new growth, Springtime, interfaith friendships, life after a pandemic, and, yes, life after death. The Resurrecting God gives us hope in all circumstances, even as we find ourselves facing ongoing pandemic challenges, racial strains and reckoning, never-ending gun violence, political polarization, and widening economic disparities. We believe in the Risen Christ, we confess our communal participation in social injustice and we will rise again to face the challenges before us and to remain resolute in doing what is right.

Following four years in ordained ministry, I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem. I remember many aspects of this trip: the people I met, the places I saw, and the feelings I felt being in this Holy City. I remember being disappointed by the lack of feeling at some of the traditional, highly ornate, religious sights. The pageantry of it all surprisingly left me feeling very little...if anything somewhat cynical. I think I was disappointed because I needed and longed for a religious experience at this time in my life and had hoped this journey would inspire me.

However, there was no pageantry at the place of Golgotha, where the Risen Christ died on a cross. Outside the inner wall of Jerusalem, next to the garbage dump stood the place where crucifixions were carried out. A public bus station now occupied the space because important crossroads meet there. I was surprised and did not expect the impact of this unmarked holy place. As I stood overlooking this ordinary public bus station and as I listened to a Muslim woman chanting in the background, I had my own encounter with the Risen Christ—wondering with disbelieving joy about this One who died on that hillside 2000 years ago, who died and who is alive, who touched my heart as a little girl and who continues to be the anchor and hope of my life.

Do I believe in the resurrection? Of course I do, with disbelieving joy and wonder. Hallelujah! Amen.