

“THE PAST IS PROLOGUE”  
Luke 24:36b - 48; Acts 3:12-19  
April 30, 2006  
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It was somewhere around 4:30 in the morning on August 17, 2003. Shauna and I had brought Grace home from the hospital to our home in Richmond, CA only about a day and a half earlier. Grace was not yet nursing and, in fact, at that point we were finger-feeding her with syringes in an effort to get her to eat. I had been up late into the night sharing pictures of Grace’s first two days with friends and family via the web; and, thus, when she awoke and Shauna needed help with the syringe system, I was less than alert when Shauna tried to awaken me; and even when I finally managed to awaken, I am sure I was less than helpful. I remember Shauna saying something like, “Ryan, we have a baby now. I need you to wake up!” Sensing the urgency in her voice, I remember groggily jumping out of bed and getting into gear. Somehow, in my sleep that night, our status as new parents slide out of my head; and until hearing Shauna’s rather urgent words, I honestly wasn’t aware of anything except being tired. And then something changed, and everything that was before no longer mattered. A new chapter had begun; and, honestly, I don’t think I have ever slept the same again. My past life as “simply” a husband was no more. Now I was a dad, with new responsibilities—a reality that really became apparent as I was jolted awake in the dead of night. My past was but 72 hours old, and it was now just a prologue for life as a parent.

The disciples, too, were jolted awake: not once, or even twice but, according to Luke, they were jolted awake by three resurrection appearances. Luke tells us that the first appearance occurred on the Emmaus road; there the disciples only recognized him when he broke bread with them. The second appearance is referenced only in passing as an appearance to Simon; and then, in this week’s text, we hear about Jesus’ third appearance when he suddenly interrupts their huddled conversation and greets them with “Peace be with you.” These words are both a typical Jewish greeting and a sign that the time of the kingdom of God has come. For the disciples, I suspect, each of these appearances had a rather jolting effect.

Remember, these are the same disciples who left their jobs and families to follow Jesus; yet they never did quite understand the message he was preaching. The disciples probably reveled a bit in the status of Jesus and their proximity to him, yet when push came to shove, the disciples—Peter, Thomas, James and the rest—each of them betrayed Jesus or turned their backs on him. And so, when he began appearing to them, I would bet that for each one of the disciples there had to be more than a little bit of fear that welled up inside them. Not only did they have to deal with this ghostly person suddenly appearing in front of them but also with the worry that must have filled them as they wondered what he would say to them. Was Jesus coming back to strike them down, to grab them, shake them, and ask them, “Why?” Was this just some sort of trick meant to fill them with fear because they had turned their back on God’s son when he needed them most? “Resurrection appearances as revenge”: it has “Hollywood horror movie” written all over it. But even without Hollywood’s help, it is impossible for me to read of the resurrection appearances without thinking of the unrecorded fear that had to be in the minds of the disciples.

But, of course, Jesus didn’t appear to the disciples to rage in anger at their betrayal or even to

threaten the disciples because of their dense behavior. Instead, he follows up his greeting of peace by imploring them to recognize that he has, indeed, been resurrected. It is evident that he knows they are unlikely to really believe that it is him; so, in yet another moment that screams for Hollywood special effects, the risen Christ eats in front of his disciples, thus telling them that he is not simply a ghostly presence but a real person capable of even the most mundane and human tasks. And then, once he is sure he has their attention, he begins to teach them yet again. The teacher has returned and the pupils are attentive. And then Jesus reminds them that everything that happened to him *and to them* fulfilled the scriptures—from the laws of Moses, to the writings of the prophets, and the songs of the psalmist. The promises have been fulfilled.

I imagine that, upon hearing these words, the disciples must have felt a huge load lifted from their shoulders. And then any of the guilt that remained had to be taken away when Jesus reminded them that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem.” From the depths of despair and unfathomable guilt, the disciples have just been delivered with Christ’s peace and the promise of forgiveness for the world. Surely they cannot be expected to share the Good News of Christ’s resurrection without taking the message of forgiveness to heart themselves. In his resurrection appearances, Jesus proclaims a very real message of dramatically altered existence. The past, it seems, is nothing but a prologue for the disciples. It no longer matters, because even their sin—even the sins that directly led to Jesus’ death—have been erased. The divinity of Jesus is proclaimed loud and clear in this interaction, because it is only a divine gift that could allow this bunch of rag-tag, confused, spiritually dense, and disloyal “followers” to be the beneficiaries of Christ’s message of peace, especially when what they really deserved was a thorough undressing and a summary dismissal.

What Jesus does through his resurrection appearance is to open the door for followers in future generations. The message that forgiveness is to be proclaimed through the world is the very thing that makes it possible for us to be here today. We often say that the birth of the church occurs with the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. But, in many ways, the birth of the church happens in the resurrection appearances; because the message that Christ brings frees the disciples and, indeed, frees *us* from sins and failures so that we might begin the work of helping to bring about the kingdom of God on Earth, rather than becoming consumed by our fear and doubt. And so, the question for us becomes this, “What is it that is holding us back, halting our progress, or stopping us all together?” If Jesus could and would appear to the very same disciples who played such an integral role in his own death, how then is it possible that *we* could be unworthy of participating in Christ’s ministry?

This time in the church year is remarkable to me because it is the time when we should dare to have a “born again” conversation. I know merely by speaking those words I am traveling down a path that most of us UCC folks would rather not. But hear me out; because it is much less scary than we think. As I see it, being “born again” isn’t something we even have a choice about: it has already happened to us. Those beloved and maligned disciples are our “past life”: they lived the first “Christian life”; and then when Jesus appeared to them as the risen Lord, he essentially allowed them to be reborn and re-created. This is the moment when the disciples are transformed from followers of Jesus into apostles, the moment when they are sent forward to proclaim the Good News of Christ. It is as if the resurrection appearances of Jesus somehow

allow for the followers of Jesus to be reconstituted into something entirely new. That, my friends, is a good thing; because there is no way those disciples had it in them. The past is merely a prologue for those disciples *and* for us who live after the resurrection; it allows us never to have to plummet to the depths of despair and regret that surely confronted the disciples.

What are we to do in this remarkable time of grace? How are we going to embrace the freedom that Christ's resurrection offers to us? How does this Good News change our ability (and our willingness) to participate in the ministry of Christ's church? The resurrection appearances are clearly turning points for the disciples; but so, too, should they be for us.

Similarly, today we need people to focus us on the ministry in which we are called to participate. One such event stands out from the day of my ordination at Richmond Beach United Church of Christ. Of all the things I remember that day, the words of the Rev. Paul Foreman stand out. Paul is a friend of mine, and he was there that day as a member of the Pacific Northwest Conference's Church and Ministry Commission to give the call to the offering, which was to benefit the scholarship program for the in-care students of that Conference. In his call, he asked people to give more than just for the scholarship fund. Paul mentioned that one of the ways we might give on that day was to consider the ways in which we are all called into ministry and to do something about that call. He talked about how many pastors are reaching retirement age and how ordinations are a great time to evaluate whether one should head off to seminary to accept a call to ministry. That message was surprising to me, because I wasn't expecting him to include those words—that invitation, that plea. But it has echoed in my heart these past two years since my ordination because, as I see it, accepting a call is not just about going to seminary but also about accepting the call to live a life that has been changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a call for all of us. The resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples announce that there is no longer time or reason for any of us to hide the skills and ideas we have for responding to the needs of God's people. My friend Paul's words echo the words of Marianne Williamson, who co-wrote Nelson Mandela's inauguration speech. On that day, when forgiveness and reconciliation ruled in the previously desolate and divided nation of South Africa, Nelson Mandela spoke these words: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that others won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us: it's in everyone. And, as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

In our lesson, the disciples were liberated from their bumbling and stumbling attempts to follow Jesus. They were made new and, by extension, we also are made new. The real question is, "What are we going to do with that knowledge and the power that comes with it?" We all know the homeless and the mentally ill in our community need more help; and we know that even with all the resources being poured into that area of services, there is still more need. We all know that AIDS is ravaging our inner cities and entire nations in sub-Saharan Africa. We all know that hurricanes, tornados, and earthquakes have destroyed the lives of many millions in just the last year. We know that Oregon has some of the highest numbers for those affected by childhood

hunger. What are we doing about it? We are responding in some ways; but what more are we called to do? At the moment I don't have some brilliant idea for how we might better respond to these issues, but I would bet there are ideas out there that we have not been courageous enough to share. I would suspect that in the pews of this church—or in other churches—someone has an idea or a piece of an idea that could be built upon, that could drastically change how we address these issues of great need. Yet I think we live in fear—not just lay people or clergy, but all of us—we live in fear that we are too flawed, too sinful, too simplistic in our thinking so that ideas and brainstorming lie fallow when they could be the building blocks of a great revolution for how we care for one another, how we meet each other's needs, how we live out our shared call to ministry.

Once again, I am going to step into my rock and roll comfort zone and share lyrics with you. They are U2's lyrics from their song simply titled, "Grace." The song speaks of the blessing of God's grace and its transforming power. The song closes with these words:

“What once was friction,  
What left a mark no longer stings.  
Because grace makes beauty out of ugly things.  
Grace finds beauty in everything  
Grace finds goodness in everything.”

That “everything” includes us: those “ugly things” that are transformed into beautiful things are us, complete with our prejudices, our biases, our anger, and our sins. But those things are just a prologue for the ministry in which we are called—together—to participate. “He is alive, Christ has risen,” and we are re-made by God's grace.

The resurrection appearances of Jesus offer us the opportunity to think about what that must have been like. . . about the looks on the disciples' faces and all that stuff in the past. But the resurrection appearances also demand that we formulate responses so that repentance and forgiveness can have real consequences and results for God's kingdom on earth. God is awaiting our response to that, even today. Thanks be to God. Amen.