

# Open Minds

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**Luke 24:36-48**

The room in Jerusalem is animated. Chatter abounds among Jesus' disciples and their companions. Every inch of the space is full of nervous energy. How could it not be? According to Luke, Peter claims he has seen Jesus, the risen Jesus, live and in the flesh. It's all anyone can talk about.

And while they are, Cleopas and his unnamed travel companion arrive and **they** tell the rest **their** amazing tale. They tell how they'd been walking on the road to Emmaus, how they'd been processing the incredible news from the women that Jesus' tomb was empty and supposedly he was alive, although they didn't have direct proof. And they tell how a man fell in step alongside them and joined their conversation. They breathlessly tell how they had no idea who he was, until they broke bread together, when the "aha" moment arrived, their eyes were opened and they recognized who he was – Jesus.

First Peter, and now two more claim they have seen Jesus. Yes, you can feel the electricity in the entire room as they tell their implausible tales. How could you not?

This is the scene as we enter today's Gospel narrative from Luke. Everyone is on edge. Then, just like that, Jesus himself appears and says "Peace be with you."

Every time we delve into a Gospel story, we enter the realm of possibility that we'll discover something that we never noticed before – something that changes the way we look at it, the way we think about it. It may amaze us, or more likely – it may puzzle us with a paradox. Now, I confess I happen to love the mental gymnastics a good paradox engenders, and I noticed one here that I hadn't noticed before.

Consider many of the synonyms we have for peace (I wish Becky Veitch's word girl were here): concord, harmony, calm, quiet, stillness, tranquility, silence, serenity. And now consider that not one of these describes the atmosphere in that room just after Jesus appears and announces his gift of peace. In fact, it's just the opposite. If those gathered in that room were edgy and disconcerted before, now they are downright terrified and full of fear.

It's a ghost, a spirit, a frightening apparition. I remember as a kid, going on bike rides with my twin sister through the Parker cemetery, hurrying through the paths back to the main road beyond the fence, for fear of what might rise up out of those graves. (I think I got too big a dose of "left behind" theology.) Jesus proclaims peace, and the disciples experience fear, at least for a while – which testifies to the power of fear.

Fear is not confined to the first century; it's a twenty-first century issue. Fear dominates our culture. Of course, you don't need me to tell you that. You've probably heard the stories in the media just this past week – stories about more fears of homegrown ISIL terrorists, this time in Australia; another suicide bombing happened in Afghanistan; we were reminded of the 20<sup>th</sup>

anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, and the second anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombing. Let's not even talk about the legacy of 9/11.

One of the hardest things I've witnessed is seeing the fear experienced by elderly nursing home residents whose only view of the outside world comes from what they see in the news media. They fear the world will end tomorrow. Now they are not only physically confined by their surroundings, they are also emotionally confined by the fear-exploiting headlines designed to grab attention. What a hard way to live.

And of course, politics thrives on feeding our fears. So-called "conservative" candidates fire up the base and slap the dreaded "liberal" label on their opponents, and so-called "liberal" candidates plaster the dreaded "conservative" label on their opponents. Both are effective.

Advertisers exploit our fears to sell products. They tap into our fears that we aren't attractive enough; that we don't look young enough, or we don't look old enough. We fear we won't be accepted by our peers.

We fear for the safety of our children. We fear for their future – that they won't get into the right school that will guarantee them career and financial success. So kids in high-achieving households feel the pressure to take the SAT's four or five times; they apply to 10, 12, 15 different colleges, even as kids with no support systems don't get to apply to even one.

We are glued to our iPhones and Androids and tablets because we have a disease called "FOMO" – "Fear of Missing Out."

We fear climate change and the devastating effect of pollution on wildlife and delicate ecosystems.

We fear the economy will tank, and we will lose our livelihood. We fear illness, and death. We fear change. We fear loss. We fear failure – oh, how we achievement-driven types with all kinds of initials after our names fear failure.

Maybe we fear we're not good enough to deserve love from others, even from God. Maybe you fear those things. Maybe you fear something else. Chances are you fear something. Even if we claim to be disciples of Jesus, we are not immune to fear.

We respond by seeking safety and security. Some of those responses are good, based on legitimate fears. A bike helmet saved a friend of mine from a serious head injury. We have child protection policies to guard against abuse, because we are entrusted with children's lives, and every child deserves to be safe. In every area of our lives, we have safety procedures and rules and guardrails of all sorts, for good reason.

However, as Scott Bader-Saye points out, if fear leads us to place our own security above everything else, it actually **hinders** us from following Christ's call. In fact, he writes, "It shapes decisions as well as character, while it feeds an "ethic of security" that raises personal and national (and, I would add institutional) safety to the status of highest good."

I have a hunch that all those frightened disciples gathered in that Jerusalem room could have used some assurances of safety and security when they thought they saw a ghost. But Jesus didn't bring them security, writes Nancy Blakely; he brought them peace. He didn't inoculate them against their fear, but he brought them through it to the place where their minds were no

longer trapped by it, but open to the possibility of resurrection and new life for them, and for others.

Alex Evans writes, “The real danger of fear is that it turns us inward – to think and fret about self-preservation...the real danger of fear is that it carries us a long way from Easter – and Easter life, Easter joy, Easter hope.”

Maybe that’s why Jesus didn’t say, “Safety be with you,” or “Security be with you,” but “Peace be with you.” Safety and security do not allow for doubts and uncertainties. But the peace of Christ still does, and what could possibly speak a greater word of resurrection hope to our 21<sup>st</sup> century anxieties than this?

“Peace be with you,” Jesus said. In that room, his followers were startled and frightened. Then he showed them his hands and his feet – his flesh and bones. “Look at them,” he said, “look at them.” And as he did, he brought them through their fear not to a place of certainty and security, but to my favorite paradoxical line in this story – at least today it is – “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, Jesus asked them, do you have anything around here to eat?” Joy **and** disbelief **and** doubt **and** the need for physical sustenance all at the same time.

The sheer idea of Easter is confounding. In that vein, David Lose says that “if you don’t have serious doubts about the Easter story, you’re not paying attention...the promise of resurrection, new life, and grace is so outlandish, so uncommon, and so desperately necessary that it has always elicited a measure of doubt. But it has also always elicited changed lives as well.”

We struggle with understanding the claims of Easter faith. Is its power historical? Is it literal, or metaphorical, or something else? Is it in the life to come? Is it in the here and now? And perhaps the bigger question - what if we don’t get that understanding right - how many people fear what God might do if we don’t believe just so? There’s fear again, rearing its ugly head.

And it’s my hope that Third Church is a faith community we can practice our faith without having the security of all the sure and certain answers about this crazy and improbable Easter story. It’s my hope that this unlikely story can change lives.

One of my favorite scholars, Walter Brueggemann said in one sermon, “The Easter question for us is not whether you can get your mind around the resurrection, because you cannot. Rather, the question is whether you can permit in your horizon new healing power, new surging possibility...new ways of power in an armed fearful world, new risk, new life, leaping, dancing, singing, praising the power beyond all of our controlled powers.”

In other words, joy and disbelief and doubt and new life all at the same time. Could the risen Jesus’ gift of peace move us through our fears to a radical response of gratitude and witness? Dorothy Soelle wrote that change happens at the level of action that causes risk. Could Jesus’ gift of peace lead us to follow Christ’s call even when we’re not always sure if this whole Christian faith thing is real? Could it lead us to audaciously act as if the concentrated poverty of Rochester is not a foregone conclusion for all time? Could it lead us to disassemble the institutional segregation that defines our community? Could it lead us to give up our personal monuments so that others can thrive and prosper as well? Could it lead us to try one more time

to reduce the availability of guns on our streets? Could Jesus' gift of peace lead us to give up an ethic of security so that we might actually live life abundantly in spite of our fears?

Imagine the possibility if that were so. Imagine if the risen Jesus walked into this sanctuary right now and said, "Peace be with you." What would our response be?

Amen.