

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

³⁷ *They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."*

⁴⁰ *When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.*

⁴⁴ *He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."*

⁴⁵ *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:36-49)*

Why Didn't They Believe?

I seem to have a little bit of a credibility problem. In just a couple of weeks, we're going to have our public examination for our confirmands. I spend a lot of time prepping the kids to stand up here and answer questions about our teachings in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. I usually tell the 8th graders not to be too nervous because almost everyone survives examination. They always laugh at me. Somehow, they don't seem to believe that they might not live through it. It's like they think I'm joking or something.

Of course, I am and after two years with me, they know it. I would like to believe that when I'm serious with them, they do believe what I teach them about faith and life. But you know what? Almost every year it happens: an 8th grader is confirmed and then we don't see them again. Even though they stood up here and promised to be faithful in hearing the word and coming to communion, even though they confessed their faith and promised to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away, some kids, apparently, don't believe what they have been taught.

Or maybe it's more complicated than that. Our gospel lesson for today shows that reality. We're going back again to the evening of that first Easter Sunday, when the disciples were gathered in that upper room, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews. They had already heard reports that Jesus was alive – in a couple of cases, from people who had actually seen him and spoken to him. Then Jesus himself came to them. But Luke makes clear today that even then, they struggled to accept what had happened. **Why didn't they believe?**

I.

Luke shows us different reasons this morning. Jesus appeared and said, **"Peace be with you!"** Then Jesus said, **"Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?"** He went on to tell them, **"This is what I told you while I was still with you,"** and then he opened their minds so that they could understand the Old Testament scriptures and explained what all those prophecies really meant: **"The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."** All of that explanation points to one of the reasons for their struggle. **Why didn't they believe? Because they didn't understand.**

They didn't grasp that when Jesus told them that he was going to die and rise, he meant that his physical body would come back to life. They kept thinking he was speaking in parables. Like many people today, they had trouble seeing the resurrection in the Old Testament Scriptures, although it is most certainly there. On a deeper level, they just couldn't wrap their heads around this most basic Christian teaching: Jesus rose and so will we. And they were not alone. Once I was teaching a Bible Information Class to a young couple. When we got to Jesus' return and the resurrection, the wife had a question. She said, "Pastor, are you saying that our bodies are going to come back to life?" She had never heard anyone say that before. In that respect, she was right in line with what our culture thinks. The overwhelming majority of Americans believe in some kind of afterlife. They believe that we go to a better place or that death takes us to a new plane of existence. They

almost always conceive of life after death in very positive terms for just about everybody. But fewer and fewer Americans even consider the possibility that these bodies might live again.

Why not? Because it never happens. Not one person that I've buried has come back from the dead. Not one person at any funeral I've ever attended has knocked on the inside of the coffin and said, "Let me out!" When we die, it's over – as far as we can see here. Even though chemical embalming fluids can preserve our bodies for years, no one really expects those old, broken, disease ravaged and chemically pickled bodies to live again. But that is the promise of Easter. Just as Jesus lives, we will live. The disciples had trouble believing the message they kept hearing that day because it didn't make sense. They had trouble believing the clear words that Jesus spoke to them before it even happened. His enemies understood. They posted a watch to keep them from saying Jesus had risen. But his disciples couldn't wrap their heads around what God's promises meant. So it was hard to believe they had come true.

But the promise was true. Jesus did rise. Now, even after they saw him, they couldn't understand how God could make dead flesh live again. We can't understand that. But like them, we do understand that this is what Jesus promised. His body died and then that body lived again. All the damage of the crucifixion was undone. Just as Jesus' body lived again, so will ours. All the damage will be undone. Old age will be erased. Sickness and violence and accidents will leave no mark. Our bodies will be glorified. Jesus conquered our sin and he has forgiven us, so everything that sin did to us, physically, emotionally and spiritually – it all gets wiped away. That's the last great gift of the gospel.

II.

But that wasn't the only thing that got in the way of the disciples' faith on that first Easter evening. There was another problem: fear. When Jesus appeared to them, they were startled and afraid. Fear keeps the brain from working. Fear is the opposite of faith, so it always gets in the way of faith. Without God's cure in the gospel, fear can kill faith. So, **why didn't they believe? Because they were afraid.**

Their fear took a particular form: they thought Jesus was a ghost. Even though they had already heard reports that he was risen, that's where they went. It's not terribly surprising. They lived in a very superstitious culture. But even today, the supernatural is the source of all kinds of ideas and fears, most of which have nothing to do with what God actually says. What is a ghost? The Greek word that Luke uses is "a spirit." It's the same word that God uses for the Holy Spirit and one of the two words God uses for our soul. A ghost would be the soul of a dead person, separated from its body, walking this earth.

Now, let's be clear: the Bible gives absolutely no reason to believe that ghosts exist or that the souls of believers or unbelievers ever walk this earth, although lots of people thought they did at the time of Christ. You can kind of see where this idea comes from. According to the Bible life is when the soul and body are joined together. Death is the separation of the soul and body. So when the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost, how did Jesus prove otherwise? He let them touch him. He ate something and showed that it really stayed in his stomach. He pointed out that a ghost wouldn't have a body like he did. That calmed their fear.

Now, maybe we're tempted to smile a little at this quaint fear of ghosts. But you know what? Lot of people today are afraid of the supernatural. Even if that's not high on our list, we need to recognize that fear is a real part of the human condition. Anxiety is one of the most common afflictions of the modern age. Fear and anxiety often are irrational, but that doesn't mean those feelings aren't real. In fact, they can be paralyzing. In the end, the real concern for us is what we see in our gospel lesson: fear attacks our faith.

Does that mean the disciples were unbelievers? No. They were weak in the crisis that came from their Lord's crucifixion. Fear and ignorance kept them from clinging to the promise Jesus made that he would rise. That cost them enormous comfort over the next three days. But that doesn't necessarily mean that if they had died at that moment, they would've gone to hell. Rather, what you see here is what we go through every single day: every believer is both a sinner and a saint at the same time. We have an Old Man, the sinful nature, who does not believe in Jesus. And we have a New Man, the believer inside us, who absolutely trusts in all that Jesus said and did. But we don't have a little angel and a little devil who sit on our shoulders arguing. We are one person. So when the Old Man wins, we doubt, we sin, we tremble with fear. And when the New Man wins, the very same people, you and I trust and take comfort and live for Christ. The Old Man was winning on Easter evening in spite of all Jesus had done to prepare them and in spite of all the messages they had already heard indicating he was alive. Even when Jesus appeared before their eyes, that Old Man didn't just give up. He went down swinging.

He does that to us, too. Every crisis is a new opportunity for the Old Man to challenge our faith. But the New Man doesn't just give up either. He is God's new creation in our hearts. When we hear the gospel, we pump strength into him to cling to Jesus. Jesus died because we sinners needed all our sins paid for and so God sent him to do that. Jesus rose to tell us all that our sin is gone forever. He rose to tell us that death and hell don't win. We will live with him forever. He rose to tell us that between now and then, Jesus will never leave us here. He is doing everything for our good. That message gives the New Man the power he needs to drive that Old Man back. That gospel message conquers our fear. Now, like the disciples, we will have ups and downs here. But when Jesus comes for us, that Old Man will be gone. Only the New Man will be left. No doubt or fear will ever trouble us again.

III.

That leads us to the final thing that got in the way of their faith. Luke says, "**They still did not believe it because of joy and amazement.**" That's actually when Jesus ate that bread and fish, to overcome this last obstacle to their faith. But Jesus' resurrection seemed too good to be true. **Why didn't they believe? Because they were overjoyed.**

A couple of weeks ago, a Canadian junior hockey team was in a traffic accident and 15 people were killed. But the coroner misidentified one of the bodies, and so the parents of one athlete were told that he was dead when he was actually in the hospital. When they figured out the mistake, someone had to tell parents who had already begun to grieve that their son was alive. I imagine that at first, it was a little hard to believe – not because they didn't want it to be true but because it was the thing they wanted most in the world.

When Jesus cleared away the disciples' ignorance and silenced their fears, joy and wonder actually got in the way. It would've been possible for them to reject what their eyes were seeing because it was too good to be true. So Jesus worked through the gospel that he was showing them and telling them, and he made sure that nothing, not even joy, kept them from trusting what he had done. Jesus does the same for us. Now, we don't get to see the risen Christ, not yet anyway. But Jesus is risen. And God comes to us every time we hear that message and he works in our hearts. That message is the very power of God. It picks that New Man up and strengthens him to fight again.

And he'll need that strength, because that Old Man inside us never stops questioning our faith. So which one of those issues gets in the way of your faith? Fear? Difficulty understanding God's promises? Or is it just too good to be true? Or is it something else? Whichever challenge you face, our lives here are a constant battle between faith and unbelief. That's why it's so hard for our confirmands to keep the promises they make. They do mean it when they stand up here. But every day, we have to fight that battle again. The Old Man pushes fears and ignorance and doubt. We have to face the questions this world raises – some of which are pretty tough to answer. It's not enough to say, "Just believe it!" Jesus addressed the difficulties his disciples faced and we need to do that for each other and for our young people. If we don't address their questions, we will begin to lose those kids, because their Old Man will never stop trying to kill their faith.

But no argument is enough without the gospel. Nothing we say or see or hear matters without the power of God to convince our hearts. In the end, as we said last week, the Bible's definition of faith is being certain of what we do not see. Only God can give us that certainty. He does that through the message: Jesus is risen! Our sins are gone! Death is defeated and we will live! Yes, it is a battle here. Yes, doubts do rise in our hearts. But Jesus never leaves us. Hear his gospel. Jesus will fortify your faith. Amen.