

New Beginnings: Discipleship
Acts 3:12-26
Luke 24:36b-48

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
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All four of the Gospels record stories of the risen Christ appearing to the disciples. All of the stories are different and some even contradict each other in terms of sequence of events, who exactly was where and when, that sort of thing. But all of the Gospels are consistent about at least one thing: the initial reaction to Jesus' resurrection was *doubt*. From the Gospel of John comes the story we read last Sunday of "doubting Thomas," and today we read from Luke that *all* of the disciples doubted Jesus even as he was standing right in front of them in bodily form, in flesh and blood.

"Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Jesus asks them (Luke 24:38).

But look what happens to that doubt in a relatively short amount of time. In a relatively short amount of time we get the events recorded in Acts 3:12-26. (And in case you don't know, the Book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. It was written by the same writer. Luke-Acts is considered one long book with two parts, the first part being the story of Jesus and the second being the story of the early followers of Jesus who established the early church.) So, the disciples *doubt* the risen Christ in Luke chapter 24, but by the time we get a little smidge of a way into the Book of Acts, Acts chapter 3 to be precise, we find the disciples boldly proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus and performing "signs and wonders" in his name. How do we account for this?

Have you ever gotten really good news—and I mean really really good news—that was so good that at first you could not bring yourself to believe it? I remember the time I picked up the phone one morning at my office at the church I served in NH. It was my husband Carlos calling. "I'm calling to tell you I'm OK," he said. "My car is totaled, but I'm OK."

He'd gotten into a car accident, which was traumatic for me since my parents had died in a car accident, so that was bad, but really the phone call was fabulous news. "I'm calling to tell you I'm OK," he said. Of course I didn't believe him.

"Are you sure you're OK?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm OK, and nobody else was hurt."

"But are you really OK?" I pressed him.

"Yes," he said, in a calm voice, and in plain English. "I'm really OK."

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Carlos was sure, but I was beside myself and I would not be sure until I’d left the church, driven to the scene of the accident, gotten out of my car, walked toward his open arms and buried my face in the side of his neck. Only then could I believe it. Yes, he was OK. Yes, he was alive. Yes, this phone call was good news. Thanks be to God.

Have you ever gotten good news that was so good you could not, initially, believe it?

When the risen Christ appears to the disciples in today’s story, he takes his time with them. He’s hungry, so they fry up a fish for him and he eats it. Then he has a long talk with them to explain a lot of things. “You are witnesses of these things,” he tells them (Luke 24:48). *Witnesses.*

Fast forward to Acts chapter 3. Peter and John have healed a crippled beggar and now the beggar is clinging to Peter and Peter is talking to the crowds who may well be having a hard time believing what they have just seen with their own two eyes. Peter tells them the risen Lord Jesus is responsible for this miracle, and he gives a brief synopsis, adding, “To this we are witnesses” (Acts 3:15b). *Witnesses.*

Those who witnessed their risen Lord up close and personal, who saw the nail marks in his hands and who watched him eat a piece of broiled fish, are now testifying to what they have seen and experienced. Moreover, they have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. The risen Christ is present with them personally and directly through the Holy Spirit. So they are also witnesses to an inward experience of the presence of the risen Christ. And in the Book of Acts we are already beginning to see transforming effect this is having on their lives.

Speaking of witnesses, when an unarmed black man named Walter Scott turned to run away from a white police officer in South Carolina after being pulled over for a broken taillight, the police officer shot him five times, killed him, then handcuffed the dead man and planted a stun gun near the body. We only know this because there was a witness. We only know this because that witness had filmed the shooting as it was taking place with the camera in his smart phone. We only know this because the witness, although frightened for his own personal safety, chose to come forward and share the evidence of what he personally had seen. *He chose to testify to what he had experienced and knew to be true.*

This is a really good way of understanding what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We are witnesses. We have experienced the risen Christ—somewhere along the way—somehow or other. We didn’t personally witness him in the Upper Room with the disciples or walking along the road to Emmaus, but we have experienced him inwardly, spiritually, by faith. In him we have found something that was missing. We have been healed of our infirmities—whether of body or spirit. We have been knit back together after something or someone totally unraveled us. We have been restored or renewed or

made whole in some terribly important but deeply personal way by our own deeply personal experience of the risen Christ. Faith in the risen Christ heals and restores us, *and it is our job to testify to what we have experienced and know to be true.*

I would go so far as to say that this is the number one mark of our identity as individual Christians and as a faith community: *to witness to the reality of the risen Christ whose presence heals and restores.*

And so I want to say more about healing, and about restoring. Jesus healed, and so did Jesus' disciples after he had died and risen and left them in charge. In our story from Acts this morning Peter and John have just healed a crippled beggar, and while this man that they've just healed is clinging to them, the crowds gather and Peter begins to preach.

He's preaching about Jesus, but the audio-visual aide that he has with him that brings home the reality of what he's preaching about is the beggar that everybody knows WAS lame but who NOW walks. He'd been healed. He stands there in front of them, healed and clinging to the healer who was himself a disciple and *witness* to the merciful love of the risen Lord Jesus.

Jesus healed. Jesus' disciples in the early church healed in the name of Jesus. Alan Brehm writes that life together in the early church also "promoted healing in a broader sense of the term—as a restoration of wholeness to life.... When [the disciples] devoted themselves to their fellowship with one another, it was a healing thing. When they shared their possessions with one another to meet the needs among them, it was an act that promoted God's restoration of all things. When they lived and worked in the harmony of "one heart and mind," it was a manifestation of the renewal of the Spirit."¹

I believe Jesus' healing ministry continues. I believe the risen Christ continues to heal—not in exactly the same ways that healing happens in the medical profession—but in his way. And I believe the Church with a capital C and local churches like ours have a role to play in Christ's ongoing ministry of healing.

I personally have experienced all of the above. During a year of personal tragedies in which three of our four parents died, my husband Carlos and I had another reason to grieve. We had hoped to have children, but the many doctors we'd been going to all ended up shaking their heads and gently discouraging us from trying anything further. That private grief, added to the sorrow of our many public losses, was close to unbearable for me.

But, have you ever gotten really good news—and I mean really really good news—that was so good that at first you could not bring yourself to believe it?

At first I couldn't believe the pregnancy test. Then we waited for the ultra sound. Then we waited to get past the first trimester. People kept asking me how was I going to

decorate the baby's room and I said I wasn't. I just wanted the baby. I didn't care about putting cute stuff up on the walls.

Over the nine months of my pregnancy and with the birth of our son, I experienced healing of my deep grief and a new beginning. I experienced these as a miracle and as a gift of God. I experienced them as a resurrection. As real as the marks of the nails in the hands of Jesus was the taught skin of my rounded pregnant belly.

My church had been sharing our journey of grief, and now they participated in the great turnaround into a journey of joy. They threw a baby shower for us. Women knitted up a storm of receiving blankets and hats and sweaters. Their love healed us, too.

I know that some in our church family here in Bloomfield have been remarkably and inexplicably healed of severe illnesses. I also know that others have died before their time, others who were just as good and kind and faithful as those who lived. Sometimes the risen Christ gives the gift of healing from infirmities and sometimes the risen Christ gives the gift of healing from grief.

A kind of healing happens here at the Church on the Green in settings that encourage personal sharing and exploration—in our Lenten small groups, adult study classes, Women's Circle Bible study sessions, the prayer group, and in informal conversations. On a larger scale, healing happens through our community ministries—the food pantry and Feed the World on the Green. Healing happens when visitors walk in the door and feel they could belong here to the glorious hodgepodge of who we are and who we are becoming. Healing happens through music and in worship, in prayer and in silence, in a good story and in a well stated intellectual idea.

Today we embark on the discernment phase of the New Beginnings process to discern together a bold New Beginning for us as the Church on the Green. I call our attention to the early church to inspire us and help set our priorities.

I call our attention to our role as *witnesses* and to the church's role as a place where *healing* can happen in the name of the risen Christ.

Have you ever gotten really good news—and I mean really really really good news?

The answer is, YES!

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling

¹Brehm, Alan. "Signs of the Presence." A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Alan Brehm on 4/26/09 at First Presbyterian Church, Dickinson, TX and at A Community of the Servant-Savior Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX. http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2009_07_01_archive.html