
Coming to Your Senses

Luke 24:36b-48

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 19, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

When Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” we expect the wind and sea to obey him and receive the gift of his calm. But when his disciples, Christians, hear this greeting, the response is not normally “and also with you.” Rather it is most likely, “Who are you?” “Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him?” (Mark 4) Who is this offering peace for free with no strings attached, only skin with scars soaked in blood and love? Who is this?

You might imagine that when Jesus speaks “peace” everyone would listen and accept the peace. But here like in other stories of the Gospel (Mark 5), when the calm comes or peace is offered, the disciples become afraid. They weren’t afraid of a dead Jesus. It’s a living Jesus that is scary so scary that they think he’s a ghost. “If there’s somethin’ strange in your neighborhood, Who ya gonna call?” Not the disciples. Maybe the ghostbusters because the disciples are terrified and afraid. Startled with doubts arising in their hearts. Joyful yet disbelieving and wondering how we ever got into this situation, how I ever was admitted into Duke and how I ever graduated from Duke. Was it all a fluke? Joyful, but still disbelieving, maybe not quite a ghost, but all of it, a dream.

This uncertainty, this unsettled sensibility may actually be an indication that we are in the presence of Christ. Joyful, disbelieving, and terrified, simultaneously. If you aren’t afraid of resurrection power, maybe you don’t really understand. It’s not a quotidian reality to meet a resurrected God. Being terrified of the power of God unleashed in a crucified and risen Lord may actually be the righteous response because the resurrection means we have to leave our own dark, safe tombs and come alive and out of hiding to engage the world in the broad daylight of Easter. This can be daunting and scary because we’re not used to the peace of God. We may resist it. We may fear the calm because all we’ve known as daily bread is chaos.

It’s funny how we can fear what we really need—a visit to the doctor to take tests that may tell you why you’ve been feeling so sluggish lately; a long needle on the end of a vile that contains a vaccine to make your immune system stronger; a transition into a new work environment though you’ve been at the same workplace for 17 years; a change in your fan membership from UNC Chapel Hill to Duke University—we can fear what we really need. The offer of wholeness from Jesus startles us even though we may have been praying for it in the midnight hour—“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace” (St. Francis of Assisi)! The irony is that we don’t recognize it when it’s staring right at us in the flesh and bones of God’s peaceable kingdom on earth.

To go even further, Christ’s presence is what stirs things up in the first place. If he never stood among his disciples, they may have never been afraid or startled. His presence is what unsettles them. His presence doesn’t make them, or us, comfortable. And it should be this way because what kind of God has no place to lay his head or dies on a cross or eats broiled fish from Nanas? We should be startled and have doubts arise, remembering that doubt is a part of faith—“Lord I believe; help my unbelief.” We should be made uncomfortable because the resurrection should make us restless with joy and disbelief. Christianity isn’t a cozy religion of the nation-state endorsing this or that candidate in the name of Jesus; Jesus himself is not crazy enough to run for President and there are no Presidents in the spiritual kingdom, only a reigning God. When the psalmist says of God: “even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; for darkness is as light to you” (Ps 139:12), we know Jesus is not, in contemporary parlance,

our “yes man.” Discipleship is a disruption in the dark of the day. Unnerving, to say the least. Stirred by our savior.

We should be uncomfortable with our comfort because Jesus didn’t come to massage our proclivities toward the “Santa Clausification” (Cornel West) of God, asking and receiving everything we want to bolster our earthly kingdom. We never asked for the resurrection but it happened because God will work without our permission or request. The resurrection should disturb us because it is not everyday someone rises from the dead. It should shock us out of our comfort zone and lowest common denominator of spirituality. It should wake us up to the fact that we don’t have to be satisfied with death though we may sleep with it every night.

We should be awakened, unsettled when we hear about the kidnapping of girls throughout Nigeria by Boko Haram. We should be unsettled when we see the iconic 1993 photo taken by Kevin Carter of a vulture preying upon an emaciated-bloated belly Sudanese toddler. The vulture stands upright staring at and stalking the child from behind. The child is on the ground with head bowed from weariness yet like a prayer. Carter chased the vulture away and the little girl had enough strength to walk away from the vulture. Carter won a Pulitzer Prize for this photo, but he never really enjoyed it. He told a friend, “I’m really sorry I didn’t pick the child up.” He was haunted and three months later took his own life. If this doesn’t shake our souls, what will?

The fact that we are disturbed and unsettled by events in life suggests that we are in the presence of Jesus, that Jesus lives in us, because he stokes the flames of destabilization. He rocks our spiritual stagnancy through the power of the resurrection. If we gaze out onto the canvas of the world and feel fine with what we see, we may not be the disciples we think we are. But if we examine the world and declare life is not right and proclaim let justice roll down in the face of injustice and embody love even in the face of a brutal enemy and like Jesus proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free, we may actually signify the presence of Christ in our midst and in our lives. The resurrection doesn’t make us comfortable; it makes us hopeful and hope is not the same thing as comfort and endless calm.

These disciples have their doubts and fear but what else should we expect from true disciples? The presence of Jesus reveals the truth about us and that is unsettling. We should come to our spiritual senses and recognize that the presence of Christ is an unsettling presence. Jesus doesn’t bless everything we do, we are, we believe, or we desire. And this may startle us. His presence may raise more questions when we are really wanting answers. A scary Jesus is scary because though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself, took on human form, humbled himself, and died on a cross. He resembles us in his frailty and if we’re honest, one look in the mirror of our hands and feet and face, especially in the early morning, can be truly frightening.

Startled out of an eyes-wide-open slumber when we realize that Jesus is in the humble struggle, in the questions beneath our answers, in the doubts. When we have a strange, disquieting feeling, a knowing hunch, a restless nagging thought, or jagged joy, it might not be a sign of trouble, but a sign that we are in the presence of Jesus and our salvation is near because he is near, with us, as close as flesh and bones. Many times his disciples didn’t understand. They asked questions and were afraid. There was cognitive dissonance and spiritual uncertainty revealing what it means to be a faithful disciple. Human certitude is just a reflection of our feeble finitude and misguided attitude when viewed in the light of the resurrected Jesus who stirs our apparent equilibrium. The dissonance of the disciples shows us that Jesus is with them. Present not absent. When we come to our senses, we will also recognize this. In other words, following Jesus is like what one of my colleagues preached this week at the Divinity School (and yes, I am stealing his illustration). Following Jesus is like having one foot on a banana peel and the other foot on a banana peel.

Jesus is such an unsettling savior who at times makes us feel like we're on a spiritual rollercoaster that only goes upside down. We never quite attain equilibrium. This unsettling sensibility of Christian discipleship continues when we consider how God makes Godself known to us in Jesus Christ. There may be the harmony of the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, a fairly clean and speculative theological postulation. Perhaps in the world of ideas, at least at seminaries, there is no problem with this. But to assert that God incarnated in human form in the person of Jesus Christ through a virgin birth by a teenager named Mary, can create some dissonance. To remain the eternal Word of God is one thing, but then to proclaim "the Word became flesh and lived among us"(John 1) is another. The Incarnation suggests that God comes to our senses, comes to us that we may hear, see, touch, taste, and smell, as an avenue toward knowledge of God.

Jesus comes to us through our senses. The resurrection may not be logical but it is sensible and by sensible I mean "perceptible to the senses." Jesus invites his followers to a sensible discipleship. They never actually touch him but the invitation is still extended. Jesus speaks and says, "Look at my hands and my feet. Touch me and see." Then my favorite part comes—he asks them for a piece of broiled catfish and he eats it in front of them. This is understandable after three days in a tomb—anyone would be hungry. Jesus is sensible and he wants his disciples to hear, see, touch, taste, and smell. He wants them to be sensible as well, to come to know him in his body, a God who has a body, a God who lived among us yet created us. Look at me. Touch me. Watch me eat and drink sweet iced tea. Jesus is hungry, hungry for them to see him, hungry to be known as the incarnate God. Hungry for communion with us.

And Jesus can sense that we are hungry too, which is why he asks, "Do you have anything to eat?" It's not just about him, but our own hunger. Hunger to know the resurrected Lord. Hunger for daily bread. Hunger for stability. This invitation by Jesus reveals that we must come to our senses, engage our senses to know him in his resurrected power. It will take more than words and intellectual discourse even about the scriptures to know God. It will take his whole body broken yet one for our sake that we might be wholly his body, corporately and individually temples of the Holy Spirit. This is sacramental theology in the flesh.

"See from His head, His hands, His feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down!" Jesus comes to our senses that we may come to our senses. The psalmist says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good"(Ps 34:8). The apostle Paul teaches, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"(Rom 10:17). A woman was hemorrhaging blood for twelve years, and no one could heal her so she came up behind Jesus and touched the edge of his cloak(Luke 8:43-44). Mary took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume (John 12:3).

This is sensible Christianity—hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling. In the beginning, as Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco painting, "Creation of Adam," portrays, God touched humanity into being and Jesus has been touching us ever since. Holding little children in his lap. Healing lepers by a touch. Jesus comes to our senses. John Wesley calls faith a spiritual sense. The eye, ear, palate, and feeling of the soul through which we can see, hear, taste, and feel the loving presence of God in the heart. Faith is a gift of God. And this gift, this spiritual sense, can destabilize us even while it wakes us up to the reality of God.

When we come to our senses, faith can help us realize that the presence of Jesus is unsettling and stretches us to become more alive through his resurrection life, more whole and holy as human beings integrated sensibly, to know that we can experience the resurrection power of God on earth today because the resurrection happened in this world, not some other world; thus, new life and new creation can happen in this world today. We can smell it, touch it, hear it, see it, and taste it like broiled fish or bread and wine. Come to your senses and you will discern the presence of Jesus in your midst. And you know what that means? Get your two banana peels ready, one for each foot.