

## I

Even though I was only six years old, I can still remember the precise spot where I was standing in the living room when my mom and dad broke the news to me that Granddaddy had died. Maybe by the age of six I had already begun to understand that all living things eventually die, but that was the first time in my life that my awareness of the reality of death became so close and so personal, and so very, very painful.

## II

It's not something we like to think about or talk about much, but we know that all living things will one day die. And I think that's one thing that distinguishes us as human beings from all the other living beings with whom we share this planet. Our family dog has a distinct personality, and he is certainly capable of expressing his emotions, but I don't think he is cognitively aware that someday in the future, he will cross the rainbow bridge. I think that one of the things that makes us human is to possess the intellectual awareness that death will one day come for every living thing, including everyone we know and love. It's a lesson that every human being learns from the time we are very small, and it's a lesson that gets repeated over and again the longer we live.

## III

It's a lesson that the disciples knew, too. Luke's gospel tells us that after Jesus died and his body was laid in the tomb, early in the morning on the

first day of the week, the women went to finish the burial preparations that had been interrupted by the Sabbath, but when they arrived, they found the stone had been rolled away, and two men in dazzling clothes asked them why they were looking for the living among the dead and proceeded to tell them that Jesus was not in the tomb, but had risen.

The women raced back to the disciples to report this news, and the disciples dismissed it as "an idle tale," and they did not believe them.

And can you really blame them? Because as awful as the reality of death is, at least it's predictable. As my friend Anna Carter Florence puts it so beautifully, if the dead won't stay dead, then what is there to count on?

Last week, we read the story of Jesus' Easter afternoon encounter with two of his disciples on the road to a place called Emmaus, and we read how at first the disciples did not recognize Jesus. It was only after Jesus opened the Scriptures for them, and after he took bread, gave thanks for it, broke it, and gave it to them, that their eyes were opened, and they recognized that they were in the presence of the risen Lord. And then these two disciples immediately returned to Jerusalem to report what they had seen and heard.

And that brings us to our story for this morning. It's now Easter evening, and the two disciples have returned from the Emmaus road to report their experience to the others. So

listen now for a Word from God from the Gospel according to Luke, the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter, starting at the 36<sup>th</sup> verse.

*While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

I always smile when I read that bit about Jesus asking for some supper. Someone once pointed out to me that in Luke's gospel, Jesus is either on his way to a meal, eating a meal, or just leaving a meal.

In any case, it's now evening on the first day of the week, and by my count, this is now the third time in less than 24 hours that the disciples have been confronted with the incredible news of resurrection. In this latest encounter, Jesus stands right in their midst, speaks with them, shows them his hands and feet, and asks for and receives some supper.

But even after all of that, even after coming face to face with the resurrected Jesus, even after seeing and touching his hands and feet, and even after watching him wolf down some supper, Luke gives us this wonderful phrase about the disciples. "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering."

#### IV

And I wonder, friend, if that describes how you feel about this resurrection business – in joy disbelieving and wondering?

Because let's be honest, resurrection does not fit into any of our human categories of understanding. Resurrection does not line up with how we've come to understand matters of life and death.

And so if you're not sure about this story, my friend, if you're joyfully wondering and disbelieving, you're in good company – no less than Simon Peter, James, John, Mary Magalene, Joanna, and all of the saints of the church that have come before you.

Somewhere along the way, we began to draw some sharp lines around issues like faith and doubt. We began to set up faith and doubt as if those two concepts are an either/or proposition. Either you have faith, or you are a doubter. And as always seems to happen when we set up categories like that, we have a tendency to place people into those same categories. If you have faith, you're a good Christian. You're on

the inside. But if you have some doubts, or even just some wonderings, well, then you're out.

And so every time I read this passage in Luke, I smile. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering. I smile, because that phrase describes me, and so many of the Christians I have come to know and love over the years.

I submit to you my friend that doubt is not the opposite of faith. In fact, I'd go so far as to claim that some doubt is required for having a real, authentic, and live-giving faith.

To be honest, I get nervous when people assert that they have no doubts at all in their religion, because a quick survey of world history shows that when people claim that they have no doubts in their religion and they will not tolerate such talk, those very same people are often capable of doing some dark things in the name of their religion.

And so my friend, if you are joyfully disbelieving and still wondering, then thanks be to God. Because let's be honest. We can't empirically prove that this story is true. We can't use the scientific method to set up a control group and a variable group and make repeatable observations over time. I understand that there are those in our culture who find this story to simply be unbelievable, who scoff and say that religion is just something that humans made up to make ourselves feel better when we contemplate the awful reality of death.

But let me ask you, my friend. What if, despite all of our joyous disbelieving wondering, when we breathe our last and die, we discover that this story is in fact true?

Then that means that despite all of the madness we see unfolding all around us, despite all the senseless violence and the hatred and the pain and the sadness, death does not in fact get the final word.

That means that phrases that drive so much of our culture, phrases like, "might makes right" and "he who dies with the most stuff wins," and "one person can't make a difference" and "we can't really do anything about the problems facing our society" those are in fact, lies.

That means that when death comes for you and me, which we know it will, it's not the end of us, but rather just the beginning.

I readily admit that resurrection is a hard concept to wrap my mind around. I readily admit that resurrection doesn't fit into any of our human categories of understanding. And so I proudly stand with Simon Peter and James and John and Mary Magadlene and Joanna and so many of the millions upon millions of saints of the church who have gone before us – a person of faith who still finds myself more often than not joyfully still wondering. What about you?

V

And what about us? What about us, as a community of faith?

I don't think faith is a static thing. I don't think it's an either/or proposition. And to be honest with you, the relative strength of my faith has varied over time. There have been times in my life that I have had a very strong faith, and other times when my faith has been challenged and weakened, and even times at which I've considered that all of this may just be pure foolishness and an utter waste of time and energy.

And my suspicion is that I'm not the only one who's had that experience. And that's why faith is best practiced as a community exercise. Because on those days when I'm feeling like my faith has been challenged and weakened, I need you to strengthen me, to remind me of what all in God's created order that is good and pure and true and right. On those days that I'm feeling weak, I need you to be strong. And I think the way that God designed this thing is so that on those days that you're feeling challenged or discouraged or just about done, maybe I'm at a point in my faith that I'm feeling strong, and I can encourage you.

One thing is for certain, something that I learned a long time ago. Discipleship in Jesus Christ is too hard to do alone. Discipleship is a group project. If you try to go it alone, you might have some success for awhile, but eventually you'll fail.

God designed us to be a faith community together.

Sharing our stories together.

Breaking bread together.

Even joyfully disbelieving and still wondering.

Together.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.