

Third Sunday of Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA

Luke 24:36b-48

There is a story the Author Don Ratzlaff gives us in his book, "The Christian Leader" which applies well to our text today. According to the story, "The Scottish soldiers (WW II POW's), forced by their Japanese captors to labor on a jungle railroad, had degenerated to barbarous behavior (stealing from each other, fights, etc.), but one afternoon something happened. (As the group finished work and was being escorted to the camp, they arrived at the first of two security check points, where all tools were to be counted.) A shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot . . . It was obvious the officer meant what he had said. Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, no shovel was missing. Indeed, there had been a miscount at the first check point. The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others! . . . The incident had a profound effect. . . The men began to treat each other like brothers. When the victorious Allies swept in, the survivors, human skeletons, lined up in front of their captors and instead of attacking their captors they protected them. One of their leaders insisted: "No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness."

Today we have the second post-resurrection appearance in the Gospel of Luke. The appearance takes place in Jerusalem to the disciples who are gathered in secret for fear of the authorities. In the passage before Jesus had appeared to two disciples as they had walked to the village of Emmaus. Jesus fell in step with them; taught them from the Holy Scriptures the necessity that the Messiah should suffer, die and be raised from the dead three days later; and sat down and ate with them. Today we have a similar pattern. Jesus appears in their midst suddenly. The disciples fail to recognize him as the disciples on their way to Emmaus failed to recognize him. They are terrified. Jesus scolds them for doubting and shows them his feet and hands to prove that he had bones and flesh and that he was not a ghost. He then eats with them and proceeds to teach them from Scripture how the Messiah had to suffer, die, and be raised after three days. The only difference in this apparition is that the sharing of food here happens before the Biblical instruction, whereas with the Emmaus disciples the instruction from Holy Scripture happens before the meal is shared.

As with the reading from the Gospel of John last week, Jesus salutes them with the customary "Peace be with you". There is also an element of "Show and Tell" that takes place as he shows them his hands and feet. The Christian understanding of the after life is not just a spiritual understanding. The whole idea that we have souls that

are given to us at birth and then return to God after we die is not the Christian view of the afterlife. We believe in a bodily resurrection and believe that we will have restored bodies. We will have a physical presence. This is what we believe and this belief is grounded on Jesus' own appearances in a physical way to his disciples.

As with the Gospel of John, Jesus instructed his disciples. He says, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-- that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then Jesus opened their minds to understand Scripture. My friends, I honestly don't know how anyone can come to know Jesus without reading Holy Scripture. I don't know how a relationship with our Lord can be possible without the gift of the Holy Spirit opening our minds to understand how all Scripture points to and speaks about Jesus. Jesus opens their minds and hearts and then he proceeds to give them a commission. You may recall that all Gospels give us their version of the Great Commission. In fact, we read John's Great Commission last week. Today in Luke Jesus says to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." This is the commission in Luke. We are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations, beginning here in our own Jerusalem.

How sobering, my friends, it is to read this simple commission in Luke. The job of the church is to lead sinners to repentance that they may be forgiven by this Jesus who died for them. There are many who believe that the purpose of the church is to preach a moral law, to tell others how to lead their lives, to be the place of judgement. And even though I admit that we need to be reminded of how sin affects all of our relationships, and even though I admit that we need to call sinners to repentance, I believe that the primary role of the church is to preach forgiveness. To believe in Jesus of Nazareth is to believe that his love and his forgiveness can lead us into a life of freedom and joy. The Job of the church is not to pile guilt upon shame, condemnation upon judgement, and burden upon burden. I find it a great act of hypocrisy when we preachers burden all of you with the judgement and condemnation that we ourselves are unable to bear. My job is to point you to the one who can offer freedom from guilt and shame. My job is to point you to the one who can accept your repentance and can forgive your sin. The church must heed this call from Luke today and must reclaim its mission to proclaim repentance that leads to forgiveness in Jesus' name.

Our problems attracting the youth to the Christian faith is not a failure to evangelize, in fact there are many out there who are born evangelists. Our problem is not that we don't have catchy music and cool orchestras, in fact we have some of the best Christian music known to the world in our generation. Our problem is not that we don't have exciting preachers, I know many preachers who can bring us all to tears. The problem is not that we don't have enough churches, or priests, or ministers. The problem is that when many youth look at many of our Christian denominations and churches today they don't find places of forgiveness and freedom, but places of judgement and shame-giving. Many churches have forgotten a message of repentance

that leads to forgiveness and have become moralistic centers, more concerned with rules than they are with bringing sinners to the fountain of all freedom and peace.

Many denominations have become overly concerned with “do’s”. And even though I believe that there are biblically-mandated “do’s” (as the ones you find in Matthew 25:33-40), the do’s come after the “I forgive you, I accept you, I love you, I died for you, come to me you who are heavy laden....” The do’s must come as a consequence of our unconditional forgiveness and salvation. Christ did not come to earth to give us a new moral code, but rather to save us from sin and death. The moral code comes after the resurrection. The moral code comes as the fruit of our faith. The moral code comes after we have come to repentance that leads to forgiveness.

Today, I invite you to live into this forgiveness. In the words of Robert Capon “The church is not in the morals business. The world does a pretty good job of that. What the world can't get right is the forgiveness business which is the church's proper job.” (As Quoted by Stoffregen in Exegetical Notes, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian>). If you don't feel forgiven when you leave here I have failed in my duty. If you don't feel accepted and loved, then I have failed you. It is only when you accept fully in your life that someone willingly gave up his life for you that you find the freedom to love, to serve and to forgive as the soldiers in my story.

Please never forget that you are forgiven and that you are loved. Amen!