

Luke 24:36b-48

^{36b} Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look 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." ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴Then he said to them, "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." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God, our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, who offers peace to calm our fears and calls us into the world to share our faith and be witnesses of the Good News. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O, Lord. Amen.

As a young girl in the late 1950's I crouched hiding behind my grandfather's armchair, peeking timidly around the corner to see what was happening on the TV - everyone else in the room was watching the Wizard of Oz. To this day I do not like that movie - even as an adult it still frightens me when the monkeys come flying and the 'wicked witch' cackles at Dorothy and her friends. Fear - a feeling of anxiety and agitation caused by dread, terror, alarm - all are words we may use to describe how we feel when we are anxious over our safety, frightened of the unknown, or uneasy about a situation we find ourselves in.

In today's gospel lesson we find a group of disciples hiding in fear. Can you blame them? My fear of the Wizard of Oz seems petty in comparison to what they have witnessed in the days just prior to today's lesson. They have watched as their leader, Jesus, is arrested and dragged off by soldiers to face trial. They see or hear about Jesus carrying his cross, stumbling to Golgotha, crying out his last breath and dying, crucified. All hope is lost! What about them? Will the Pharisees and Sanhedrin rile up the crowds gathered for Passover to search them out and kill them, too? What are they to do, now that their leader is dead? It would seem that this group of Jesus' followers had forgotten everything that

Jesus told them when he was with them. They don't even appear to understand what has happened even though Mary has told them she saw Jesus. Possibly even the two un-named followers who had walked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus have joined the group and told them that they are sure they walked and sat and ate with Jesus. The idea of the resurrection has not sunk in - they are too overcome with fear - fear from what they have recently witnessed; fear and uncertainty of what it could mean that Christ is alive; fear of facing Jesus when like Peter they have denied Him. All is not as they expected - they do not know what will happen next, so they hide behind closed windows and locked doors, waiting, anxiously waiting.

"Peace be with you." Suddenly Jesus is right there in the room with them! Does their fear intensify, or are they filled with excitement and anticipation or a deep sense of wonder as to what could all this possibly mean? Is it really him? At first those gathered think Jesus is a ghost - that they are seeing a ghost probably made them even more afraid! The text says that they were terrified.

Jesus accepts their fear and sets out to calm them and address their unbelief. He offers his hands and side welcoming them to touch and see his wound scars. And then to prove even further that he is humanly present with them he asks for something to eat.

There has been much over the past year to create anxiety and fear in us and in those around us. Consider the things that cause you and those you know and love to experience fear and anxiety. Over this past year we have lived with the coronavirus pandemic - masks, lockdowns, social distancing, virtual school, economic uncertainties, job loss, Zoom church and more. Just watch people walk down the street giving those they encounter a wide berth. This on top of all the things that routinely happen - illnesses, shootings and violence in cities across our country even at our nation's capital, drug use by persons of all ages including children, highway traffic that sometimes goes much too fast and leads to accidents. Fear has been in the world almost since creation - remember Adam and

Eve were afraid to be seen by God in the garden after eating the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Avoiding uncertainty, unknowns, and frightening happenings is pretty much impossible.

It is so easy to get caught up in the uncertainty and fear of the moment. It is also easy in reading today's gospel to get stuck at the disciples fear and rest our focus there, to forget there is more to the story. When Norm first died the only times I could remember were the few months he was sick - the times filled with uncertainty. I needed to remind myself of the years of wonderful memories - through pictures and conversation about him with others.

I believe Jesus' approach in joining his disciples is a reminder to look beyond the fear and the unknowns and remember. Jesus accepts our fears and seeks to calm, "Peace be with you." But then he seeks to move us forward. Through the sharing of food and conversation Jesus reminds them of His hospitality throughout their ministry together - with his followers but also with strangers - he supped with Matthew, a tax collector; he called Zaccheus, a stranger, down from the tree that He might go to his house to eat. Through hospitality Jesus welcomes strangers to the kingdom of God. It is as he is gathered sharing broiled fish that He says to them, *"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."* ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, *"Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Here He also reminds them that they ⁴⁸(You) are witnesses of these things."*

We know the stories of the scripture and we, who live on the other side of the resurrection story and Pentecost, know that Jesus' death and resurrection brings forgiveness. As God promised, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to his followers and to us. We know that Peter overcame his fears because Jesus confronted him, 'Peter,

do you love me?' Jesus calmed Peter's fears, and forgave him, then sent him out to witness to others. Peter overcame his fears. In our Acts text Peter is witnessing to the followers in Jerusalem - in time he will take that witness beyond Jerusalem. We know that the disciples left their hiding place and spread the gospel, not just in Jerusalem but throughout the world. We have written testimony in our New Testament of the work of Peter, John and many others such as we read in today in Acts and 1 John. Jesus did not mean for his followers to stay hidden, shaking in fear, afraid to go out into the world. No, Jesus grants peace to the disciples, shares hospitality and fellowship, equips them with the Holy Spirit and sends them out into the world.

We too are witnesses. What better way to witness to one another and strangers than to be welcoming and hospitable. The Rule of St. Benedict 53:1 says, *"All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for him himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me."* As the pandemic continues, now with the benefit of vaccines, we will all begin to figure out what it means to reconnect more in the world and possibly less on Zoom. Just as those disciples gathered in seclusion after Jesus crucifixion did not know what was next, we also don't know what is next - today, tomorrow or next year. Not knowing can be frightening, but Christ equips us to go out as His witnesses. I leave you with this Blessing From the Abbey of the Arts Monk in the World Morning prayer written by Abbess Christine Valtner Paintner:

Holy Presence of God, you shimmer in every stranger I encounter whether in the world or in my heart. When you came in human form you sat at table with all those who walked the edges of life and knew their presence as sacred. Create in me a space to welcome in all that is hard and disorienting, those moments when I feel lost, angry, heartbroken, overwhelmed, ashamed, joyful, grieving, or in love with life. Help me to honor the guests who arrive at the door, to usher in the grace that newness offers and find Christ's compassionate presence there. May your infinite compassion grow in me the way sunlight spills across a field, and include everyone in that loving embrace. Christ is Risen! Let us share this Good News. Alleluia!