

April 15, 2018
Third Sunday of Easter

“I Recommend the Broiled Fish”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 3:12-19 ~ Luke 24:36b-48

I love our gospel lesson today. In fact, I could argue that this is the best text in the whole bible! It has everything we need, right here ... especially for moments like we are in now. We are living in a country and a world that is steeped in division and violence. If there was ever a time we needed to hear the first words out of Jesus' mouth it is now:

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Now, anybody can say “*Peace be with you*” as a pleasant wish, like “have a good day.” But when there is a real problem at hand ... a real crisis ... when the diagnosis is bad ... when you hear the words you were dreading ... when there is real cause for fear ... words are not enough to bring peace. Neither is pretending helpful. It doesn't help to say, “Well, things will get better” when it is likely that they will not ... at least not in time to help you. People try to give us words of comfort, but they ring false in our ears. When I have suffered deep disappointments, I can't count the times that folks, not knowing what to say, have offered things like, “When God closes a door he opens a window. Apparently, God can't get enough of closing doors and opening windows! And sometimes we pretend that we have the power, the authority to always be in control. I'm reminded of a favorite story.

A DEA officer stopped at a ranch in Texas and talked with an old rancher.

He told the rancher, *“I need to inspect your ranch for illegally grown drugs.”*

The rancher said, *“Okay, but don't go in that field over there,”* as he pointed out the location.

The DEA officer verbally exploded saying, *“Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government with me!”*

Reaching into his rear pants pocket, he removed his badge and proudly displayed it to the rancher.

“See this badge?! This badge means I am allowed to go wherever I wish. On any land!!

No questions asked or answers given!! Have I made myself clear... do you understand ?!!”

The rancher nodded politely, apologized, and went about his chores.

A short time later, the old rancher heard loud screams, looked up, and saw the DEA officer running for his life, being chased by the rancher's big Santa Gertrudis bull.

With every step the bull was gaining ground on the officer, and it seemed likely that he'd sure enough get gored before he reached safety. The officer was clearly terrified.

The rancher threw down his tools, ran to the fence and yelled at the top of his lungs ... (I just love this part....) *"Your badge, show him your BADGE!"*

That's one reason I love this text ... it is not about pretending ... or just thinking happy thoughts ... or the delusion of being in control. It starts with complete honesty ... those disciples were in crisis-mode. They felt terrible. Listen to the words Luke uses to tell us how they were feeling:

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? While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.

If we gathered together just to think happy thoughts, we should be pitied. But if we gathered having to pretend our faith was strong in the face of crises ... to try to look good to each other ... as if belief came easily ... it would be a crying shame. Part of being a disciple of Jesus ... then and now ... is facing the fact that doubt is part of our experience.

Faith is not the default position. It never has been. And we have to admit that there is just about nothing less likely to believe than that someone would die and rise again. Oh, there are plenty of stories of ghosts and spirits. It seems that most of us are even prepared to believe in angels and demons ... spooky things happen to everyone from time to time ... but none of us has seen someone rise from the dead.

And here is what I like even more about this text ... even when Jesus' disciples saw him standing there ... with the evidence of their own eyes ... and heard him speak with their own ears ... they still doubted. And they had a lot more to go on than I do ... so if they could doubt ... with Jesus standing right in front of them ... then my doubts at times are surely reasonable.

And when the times of fear and doubt come for me ... should I add to my problems a layer of guilt for having such weak faith? No! Because Jesus does not show up wagging his finger at us to shame us ... or even with a smug "I told you so!" Rather, he comes with understanding and sympathy for our human limitations ... and says to us "*Peace be with you.*"

I don't know whether living in a world filled with division and violence is the kind of crisis that makes you wonder where God is ... or whether your health makes you wonder ... or the state of your relationship ... or simply depression caused by the fact that life is not what you had hoped it would be ... but doubt is part of the life of faith for all of us at various times. God does not wait for us to muster faith from some inner well ... like athletes finding the strength deep down to push on in the face of overwhelming odds. Rather, it is in the moment of doubt and fear that Jesus comes to us, saying "*Peace be with you.*"

So, what does Jesus do when he comes to his doubting disciples after pronouncing his peace to them? He acts. He offers himself to them to touch:

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. ... 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.

So this was probably helpful to those doubting, fearful disciples. I'm sure that being able to touch him and watch him eat broiled fish with them did a lot to assuage their doubts. And yet this complicates it for us. We neither get to see him nor touch him today. He is not here to join us at a picnic. How does this help us with our fear and doubts?

Jesus' hands and feet probably bore the marks of crucifixion, but he did not draw attention to those scars in this moment. Nor did he say simply “look at me” ... rather he focused their attention on his hands and feet. How could they have possibly looked at those hands without recalling the people he had touched with them ... the blind people ... the lepers ... the sick people? How could they have looked down at his feet without thinking of all the places they had been with him ... places they never would have gone on their own ... to a tax-collector's house ... places where gentiles lived ... to Jerusalem itself to confront abuse and corruption right in the face of his enemies? Looking at those hands and those feet recalled his entire life for them in that moment.

This is where we are almost on level ground with those disciples. In my moments of doubt and fear, I can recall that there are countless hands and feet in the world ... right now ... reaching out with love and compassion on behalf of real flesh and blood people because the risen Christ is still at work in his people today.

It's true that most mothers and fathers around the world care for their children and do all they can for their families ... but there is really nothing special about people going out of their way to help their own clan ... their own kind ... even their own nation. The impulse to sacrifice for one's own group is hard-wired into us and indeed is an impulse we share with all species of animals.

But the willingness to put oneself at risk for others ... people who are not related ... who are not part of our “us” but who are, by every measure “them” ... the willingness to respond to human need when there will be no pay-off or pay-back ... in fact, the willingness to lay down one's life for one's enemies ... that is not simply an achievement of social biology or evolution. It is nothing less than flesh and blood evidence of the presence of the risen Christ at work ... transforming human beings into agents of God's love and justice. This is what we can see around us today.

We see the risen Christ at work when flesh and blood hands and feet show up at the Caritas and distribute food and supplies and economic aid to strangers in need. We see the risen Christ in the people who work for and financially support NATH ... for people they do not know from Adam. We see the concrete evidence of the risen Christ at work every time we take up a collection for

One Great Hour of Sharing to bring relief and justice to people who don't even look like us or speak our language.

What is the power that could take normally selfish human beings like us and transform us into people of compassion for ... and solidarity with ... strangers? It is simply that we have been changed by the power of the risen Christ. We have heard his call to repent of our selfish and sinful ways ... and we have experienced his complete forgiveness ... we have, in short, experienced redemption.

And our hearts have been enlightened to understand that this was his plan from the beginning. This is what Moses anticipated when he came down from Sinai with the law. He told us to *love the lord our God with our whole heart and mind and strength*, and to *love our neighbors as ourselves* ... specifically providing for the needs of the weak and the poor, *the widow, the orphan and the stranger*.

This is what the prophets spoke of when they pictured a time in which people would *come from North and South and East and West and sit together at a table in the kingdom of God* ... the time when they would *beat their swords into plows and their spears in to pruning hooks, and no one would need to learn war anymore*.

And this is why the Messiah came ... not as the leader of a revolution, but as the *Servant of the Lord*, who would suffer, and die, and then be vindicated when God raised him from the dead. This is exactly what Jesus explained:

Then 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." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said 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.

Yes, we are witnesses of these things ... we who have seen the hands and feet of the risen Christ at work in our flesh and blood world ... we who have come to know ourselves as Christ's disciples ... we who have repented from the evil in our hearts and have been immersed in God's complete forgiveness. We are witnesses ... even though we are still weak ... still vulnerable ... still prone to doubts and fearful in the face of crises. We can affirm that we are witnesses of the risen Christ.

This is why we experience peace that Jesus gives. It is not just a pleasant wish, but a powerful calm that comes from Jesus himself ... risen ... alive ... today!

May we pray?

Living Savior,

You meet us where we are that you might lead us where you wish. Walk with us wherever we walk. Open our ears to hear and understand your word. Open our eyes to see the opportunities

we have to serve you. Open our hearts to your loving presence that we might be seized from within by the One from beyond who is risen indeed. Amen.