

“What’s for Supper?”
The Rev. Dr. Sandy Selby - Westminster Presbyterian Church
Easter 3B - April 18, 2021
Luke 24:36b-48

Each of us can look back at our life and recall an event or circumstance—a phone call, a diagnosis, a chance encounter—that changed our life trajectory. If that flexion point, that pivot, had a positive outcome, we might say, “But for the grace of God...” If the outcome was more negative, we may find strength in the story we hear today in Luke’s gospel.

“But.” In Luke’s gospel, the story of what happened to the followers of Jesus hinges on that one, pivotal word that changed their lives—and ours—the word with which Luke’s Easter narrative begins: “But.” Luke says that after Jesus had been buried on Friday, the women “*saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath, they rested according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared*” (23:56b-24:1).

“But.” In other words, the story isn’t over! Luke goes on to tell us about the women finding the empty tomb and having two men in dazzling clothes tell them, “*He is not here, but has risen*” (24:5c), then going to tell the eleven and the other followers. The men didn’t believe the women, but that’s a story for another day. Peter ran to the tomb and he, too, found it empty, and Luke says, was “*amazed at what had happened*” (24:12b).

Meanwhile Cleopas and his friend walk with a stranger on the road to Emmaus, and when they break bread with him later in the day they find that this man who had been “*opening the scriptures*” (24:32b) to them along the way is Jesus himself. Returning to Jerusalem to tell the eleven and their companions, they are greeted with word that “*The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!*” (24:34). While Cleopas and his friend are telling the group how Jesus “*had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread*” (24:35b), Jesus himself stands among them and says, “*Peace be with you.*” When Jesus realizes that they think they are seeing a ghost, he shows them his wounded hands and his feet. Seeing that they are still in a state of both joy and confusion, Jesus asks, “*Have you anything here to eat?*”

Can you imagine what it was like for those gathered in that room? For three days they’ve been hiding there, traumatized by the gruesome death of Jesus and fearful that the authorities will now come after them. Jesus walks into the room, shows them his wounds, and asks the most mundane and unexpected question imaginable, “What’s for supper?” Then he eats a piece of broiled fish!

Then, just as Jesus had done that afternoon for the two men on the road to Emmaus, he “*opens their minds to understand*” the ways in which his life, death and resurrection fulfill the scriptures. He is, indeed, the Messiah, just as scripture had foretold! Jesus tells them, “*You are all witnesses of these things.*” “My life, my death, my resurrection: you’ve seen it all.”

In *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke tells us what happened next. After being among them for forty days, Jesus tells his followers that it is not for them to know when God will restore the kingdom of Israel. “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Then, before their very eyes, he is lifted up to heaven.

“*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.*” “But.” We’ve come to another turning point. It’s now up to the apostles and the other followers of Jesus to take

it from there, bearing witness to the life-giving power of God's love by carrying on Christ's ministry of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. By being his witnesses. Thing is, the Greek word that is translated "witness" is the root word for "martyr." This is dangerous work, and several of the apostles, along with many other followers of Christ, ultimately will be martyred.

Some days later, they receive the power of the Holy Spirit, then become witnesses to Christ's life, death, and resurrection. In today's lesson from Acts, Peter is addressing a crowd that has gathered at the temple. Earlier that day, when Peter and John went to the temple to pray, they were approached by a man who was lame, and had begged them for money. Peter ordered the man: "*in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk*" (Acts 3:6), which the man did! Then he proceeded to leap around in the temple, praising God. Peter preached to the gathered crowd, attesting that God had raised Jesus, the Messiah in whose name this man had been healed, from the dead. "*To this we are witnesses,*" Peter said. Witnesses who had been transformed by what they had seen and heard—the wounded hands and feet of Jesus, and the unexpected question, "*Have you anything here to eat?*"

For Peter and the others, witnessing the resurrected body of Jesus, and hearing his voice, was the "But" that changed their minds and their lives. They thought Jesus was dead and gone, but God had other ideas. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they were transformed from people who had witnessed Jesus' life and death, to people who risked their lives to bear witness to the further truth that God had raised this man, the Messiah, from the dead. They had seen it for themselves!

What are we to do with this, two thousand years later, when we don't see the wounded hands and feet, nor hear the voice that asks, "What's for supper?" In a scientific age, it's hard to make sense of the resurrection, to believe it really, physically happened. Easier to think of it as a metaphor.

In matters of faith, sometimes poets say it best. The author John Updike addresses how to make sense of the resurrection in the poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter," that he wrote in 1960 for a contest in a Religious Arts Festival at the Lutheran church to which he belonged. He won the contest, and gave the \$100 prize back to the church. Over the years it's become perhaps the best-loved 20th-century poem about Easter. As one commentator has said, "Updike's task in this poem is to convince readers in our scientific age that, unnatural though it be, resurrection has happened."¹ I'll read the poem slowly, then go back and see what a few key passages say to us, today:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells 'dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.

¹Dave Schelhaas, "Seven Stanzas at Easter," April 14, 2020, <https://inallthings.org/seven-stanzas-at-easter>

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

What is this poem saying to us? In Updike's very first line he states, with the word "if," what some have called "the Easter problem."²

Make no mistake: if He rose at all,
it was as His body;

"If." Reflecting on Updike's use of the word "if," commentator Dave Schelhaas writes, "Is Updike revealing his doubt that the resurrection occurred? I don't think so. More likely he recognizes he is writing in a secular age where many clerics and church members are explaining away the supernatural elements of their Christianity and therefore also the very possibility of resurrection."³ In addressing our modern skepticism, Updike repeatedly uses scientific language to describe what happened when Christ arose and what will happen when we ourselves are

²David E. Anderson, "On Easter and Updike," April 7, 2009,
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2009/04/07/april-7-2009-on-easter-and-updike/2618/>

³Schelhaas

resurrected: “molecules will reknit,” “amino acids rekindle.” Christ will have the same “hinged thumb” and “valved heart” as he had before.

In the fourth stanza Updike, himself variously a Lutheran, Congregationalist, and Episcopalian during his life, takes on liberal churches who try to “reduce the resurrection as something explainable, something natural.”⁴

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

And when we walk through that door, Updike writes, we see that it is made of real stone:

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

The stone is material; like Christ’s resurrection it is real, not a fabricated story. And “in the day of resurrection we shall walk through the door that Christ opened into eternal life.”⁵

In the final stanza Updike makes a play on the word “monstrance,” which in the Roman Catholic Church is a receptacle in which the host, the Body of Christ, is displayed for devotion. He says, in effect, don’t minimize the resurrection to fit into your view of what makes sense, lest at the time of your death you see the truth, and are filled with “remonstrance,” shame and regret.⁶ Updike writes in that last stanza,

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

Updike’s point is that what we believe and proclaim about the resurrection matters, for us as individuals and for us as the Church. In the words of the opening stanza,

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells ’dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

⁴ Schelhaas

⁵ Schelhaas

⁶ Schelhaas

We weren't there at the empty tomb. We weren't in the room, later that day, to see Jesus show the wounds on his hands and feet, and to hear him ask if there is anything there to eat. *But* ...many were there, as witnesses, and what they saw and heard, as Jesus opened their minds to understand the scripture, transformed them from witnesses to witness-bearers. And really, why would they have put their lives in danger, risking persecution and even death, if it hadn't all been true, if they hadn't seen and heard it for themselves? If they hadn't witnessed, in the most amazing way possible, that God's love has the last word?

To use contemporary language, "You can't make this stuff up."

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!