



First United Church of Christ
300 Union Street
Northfield, MN 55057
507-645-7532
church@firstucc.org

Looking for the Living among the Living
Luke 24: 1-35
March 31, 2013

The women who go to the tomb and find the stone rolled away display a common Easter state: they're confused. The women are the first people to be confused on Easter day, but they certainly aren't the last. "What are we to make of this story of Jesus being alive again?"

The angels help the women out, they remind them of what Jesus told them about crucifixion and resurrection on the third day and then the women go and tell all that has happened to the eleven apostles and everyone else who is hanging around as a follower of Jesus. In Luke the 12 are called the apostles, and then there's a crowd of disciples. So the women go back to the 11 apostles and all the rest, and everyone thinks the story is an idle tale.

Everyone except Peter, but Peter is desperate, he's a special case. His denial of Jesus is haunting him so badly the remorse fills his chest like helium filling a balloon. Peter's ready to believe anything that might ease his pain. Peter races off, but everyone else stays back. The story of the empty tomb doesn't convince them. The women's story rolls off the rest of the disciples like water down a hillside. It doesn't sink in. Nothing changes, not yet. For resurrection faith to take hold, the disciples will have to experience something.

This means that the most popular reaction to Easter was and probably is, "Ahhh, I don't know...."

This is interesting because the church has often said that the least popular reaction to Easter is the one we're all expected to have. The church has said, "Don't be like most of the apostles, and the rest of the disciples, be like Peter, instant faith, no questions asked." Peter is a pastor's dream.

But when Peter becomes the face of Easter faith, we overlook everyone else in the story, and they can be very helpful to us. Everyone else in the story needs more than the empty tomb for Easter faith to get started, and many of us may need the same.

I've been a pastor for nearly ten years and when people have talked with me about their faith, the most common theme by far is the theme of inadequacy. "I like participating in the church and I'm interested in joining, but I just don't think I believe what I'm supposed to believe." "I think Jesus is great, but there's all that other stuff, I just don't know." Or, this is very common, "I'm sure it's something that's wrong with me, everyone else seems fine with all the miracle talk, but I don't know that I have faith." At first I responded to those statements by saying, "You know, I had the same conversations with my seminary professors." Then I upgraded my response to, "You know, I think you'll find that there are other people in this church who feel the same way." And then I kicked it up a notch and started saying, "This is the UCC, no one here thinks that they have any faith. We need to get over ourselves and move on."

So much of this comes back to Easter, this time when we often feel like the Christian circle has been drawn and we don't know if it can stretch far enough to include us because we might not have faith like Peter.

If any of that resonates, then we have an opportunity. The opportunity is to see ourselves as pilgrims with lots of company, not only in the United Church of Christ, but in the story of the empty tomb itself. If Easter leaves us perplexed, confused, we've got company. If we, despite our desire to be good, faithful people, despite our desire to pass this faith along to our children hoping that they will figure out what we haven't been able to... despite ourselves if we can't help but wonder, if this is an idle tale, we've got company.

All but one of the disciples are idle tale people, and they are not cast out, they are not judged, they are not banished from the Realm of God. Instead the Risen Christ comes to meet them.

The writer of Luke knows that the story of the empty tomb on its own is unlikely to spark resurrection faith. For resurrection faith to be kindled, people then and now need to experience the Risen

Christ. For deepening trust in love that never dies, for a resilient hope in the face of the worst sin and death can do, for a deepening passion to join with this Sacred love in healing a wounded world, we will need to experience the Risen Christ. That's why the angels ask the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" It's not only a clever way to tell the women that Jesus isn't there. It isn't intended to belittle the women either. Instead that question is saying, "Don't look for the Risen Christ here, look for the Risen Christ somewhere else. The Risen Jesus is alive. You can find him." And then the writer of Luke says, "I'll even tell you where to look. Let me tell you a story."

Two disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus. And while they were walking Jesus himself came near. They don't recognize him (shhh), he just walks with them. And Jesus asks, "What y'all talking about?" And Cleopas answers. (Cleopas is a name we've never heard before which suggests Cleopas is every disciple, any disciple, us). And Jesus starts opening the scriptures to them starting with Moses. At the end of the day, the disciples invite this stranger to supper, and at supper Jesus gather's them around the table and he takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them, and then their eyes were opened. In the breaking of the bread, they see the Risen Christ. And then Christ vanishes, and the disciples are left to wonder, "Was that really? Was your heart burning inside you too?"

The story tells us that it's in the saving action of the church that we'll see the Risen Christ. And that saving action is centered around the Communion Table. Around the Communion Table the Holy Spirit binds us together as the Living Body of Christ. The Risen Christ makes a home in us to act through us as we care for one another as a community. When we pay attention to one another and care for one another when others don't, we see the Risen Christ. We experience and know that all that Jesus stood for is not dead but is still alive, right here.

The table is about radical hospitality, at the heart of the Realm of God. The disciples see the Risen Christ when they welcome the stranger to be their guest at the meal. Everyone is welcome here, no matter who, no matter what, no matter how much or how little they have. And we practice this hospitality and we practice all of God's dreams that this table holds, for a restored humanity and a restored Creation,

and we take the table into the world. When we do, others see the Risen Christ in us. Perhaps they experience that all that Jesus stood for is not dead but is still alive, in the church.

When I was in seminary, I visited as many churches as I could. The first time I visited Spirit of the Lakes UCC, now Living Table UCC, I saw the Risen Christ. The building wasn't fancy, it was an old warehouse with a cement floor. The congregation was mostly gay, and lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. There were families with children, couples, single people, elders and young adults. The service was very traditional in many ways and unremarkable, but then it was time for communion. And we came forward and circled the table and everyone joined hands. The healing welcome of the Realm of God was proclaimed, and everyone around that table allowed that good news to soak in all the way to their toes. People who didn't feel welcome in so many other churches felt welcome here. People who didn't feel welcome in so many places felt welcome here. Here they heard that they too were beloved children of God, and they promised to care for one another and to take this healing table out into a world that needs it. I saw the Risen Christ at that table, in all the people who surrounded me. All that Jesus stood for, all that Jesus was about in the world, was very much alive at that table. That community was the Risen Christ. I had no doubt. My resurrection faith started to grow: trust in love that never dies, hope even in the face of the worst that sin and death can do, and a deepening passion for the healing of the world.

Six years ago my family walked through a time of tragedy. My sister's husband Steve died suddenly leaving behind two children ages five and three. We were all absolutely heartbroken. A few years earlier my sister's family had started attending a congregation that was a better fit for them, and they became very involved in this UCC church in Davenport. After the memorial service the pastor said to me, "We will make sure that your niece and nephew and your sister know that they are surrounded by God's love." And I fell apart. And the church did, they still do. It's like they gave my sister and her children a big church hug and they still haven't let go. They brought food and gave rides and did chores and offered babysitting, they did more than we could have expected. I remember being so sad and at the same time being so grateful for that church. I saw the Risen Christ there many times, as a whole community cared for my sister and my niece and nephew. All that Jesus was about in the world was very

much alive in the compassion and care of that community. My resurrection faith deepened: trust in love that even death cannot stop, which leads to increased hope in the face of horrible pain and struggle, and it leads to a deepening passion for the healing of the world.

I see the Risen Christ here too. As we care for one another. As prayer shawls are knitted and shared. As food is dropped off and rides pick people up. As people meet for coffee and lunch I see the Risen Christ walking with those who are hurting. I see the Risen Christ in the way this church serves the world. In amazing generosity, in people working the phones trying to make political change, in all the amazing work people do when they leave this place, in the dreams for God's renewed creation that we are making our own. I see the Risen Christ in the way we desire to give the gift of this faith, this way of life to our children.

My resurrection faith grows as I serve with you. I increasingly trust in the power of God's love and because of that I hope, and I have a deepening passion for joining with God in the healing of the world. If God's not going to give up then neither will I.

Easter has been filled with alleluias and confusion from the very beginning. No matter if you have faith like Peter or everyone else there's room for you. Look for the Risen Christ to come to meet you. Look for the Risen Christ is in the saving work of the church. Our hearts will burn within us, we will see Christ in one another. We will reveal the Risen Christ to the world with our actions. And resurrection faith will grow. Thanks be to God. Amen.