

Last Thursday
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
6-2-2019
Luke 24:44-53

Easter, well at least Resurrection Sunday, was six weeks ago. And while we are technically still in the season of Easter (it's now the seventh Sunday), it may feel like the events of Holy week happened several news cycles ago. I Googled headlines from Easter week on Friday – one read, “Game of Thrones Reveals Epic Battle in Episode Three Trailer.”

It's been a while. We're different people now! The Iron Throne is old news!!!

The 24th Chapter of Luke's Gospel seeks to draw our attention back to Holy Week. Because the events of today's lection are not six weeks removed from the day of resurrection. They may not even be six hours removed from resurrection. That's because a lot of stuff happens in the course of one day, all of it on a Sunday: an empty tomb; an appearance on the Emmaus Road; another strange appearance among the disciples; a broiled fish supper; a blessing; an ascension; worship.

So, this morning, I want you to imagine that last Thursday was Maundy Thursday. Remember when we gathered at a table? Jesus sat around, eating supper with the women and men whom he knew best, the ones whom he loved and cherished. The ones, who even though they would abandon and betray him in moments of weakness, would eventually live into their callings. Jesus gathered them near. And he gave long life to a simple meal. And we got to peek in on that story. Not just last Thursday, but any day we want. And if you were really paying attention, you'll remember that the disciples left that place singing, and went to Bethany, a quiet little retreat, before the calm ended, and the chaos began.

Then a trial. Then a crucifixion. Then a really long Friday evening. And an even longer Sabbath. And then an empty tomb. And it's not even noon!

Jesus appears, first on the Emmaus Road to Cleopas, though Cleopas struggles to identify him. And a little later to the whole of the disciples as Cleopas recites his encounter. Jesus shows them his wounds; he even eats some fish just to show them he's no ghost.

Then the text tells us that Jesus opens their minds to understand the scriptures. Basically, Jesus tells them that all of the things the prophets have taught have been fulfilled in his life, death, and resurrection. "Yes, this was real, all of it," he says. "And you are witnesses to God's work in the world. Work that's gonna continue right here in Jerusalem, and fan out into every nation. And pretty soon, the power that has filled me, is gonna fill you up, too!"

And then, this is the best part, Jesus leads them out as far as Bethany. And he blesses them. That is he commissions them, affirms them, acknowledges them, equips them, identifies them, ordains them as witnesses to God's inbreaking realm. And with his touch, and with his words, he says, "You have the ability to go and do God's work. And not only do you have the ability and the potential to do so, you're gonna live into that ability and potential."

And Jesus leaves them. And they worship a presence that has always been and will always be.

I've taken a roundabout way to get to my point this morning, but I promise I'm getting there. I am mesmerized by the symmetry of these events. But even more so, I'm mesmerized by their truth.

Easter begins with a Passover meal; one we call Communion. Bread and wine, for everyone. Jesus offers it to you, because you are YOU!!! "So you're human," he says. "Well isn't everyone?!? That doesn't mean that God won't still do remarkable things with you. And it doesn't mean your presence is any less dear, any less vital, any less necessary to creating a whole community." So, Jesus blesses the bread, and the wine, and all those gathered. And he breaks the bread, and he pours the wine, and he shares his life with us and us him. And Jesus, and his friends, in celebration of such recognition, decide to go to a garden in Bethany, and sing, and worship, with one another.

A few days later, miraculous, unexplainable things happen. And here is Jesus. And here are the disciples. And here are all those women who should have been called disciples if the ancient writers had possessed any sense. And there's a meal. And of course, it's shared, even for strangers. Cleopas invited Jesus to the table, even though he did not yet recognize him.

And just as Jesus shared the bread and cup on Thursday, he shares his calling and work on Sunday. "Yes," he says, "I am the fulfillment of all these prophecies. And we have done good work. But this work isn't contingent on me alone. The same spirit, the same power, the same opportunities and calling that God provided for me, are also gonna be available to you. So I need you to wait here, because you are gonna be witnesses to all we have done, and all that will be done."

And he leads them to a quiet garden in Bethany. And he blesses them. And there is singing. And there is life. And there is worship.

This morning, I'm not in the least bit worried about the particulars of ascension. Did Jesus levitate, or fade out like a PowerPoint transition, or move into some new spatial plane? I could really care less. Just like I'm not all that interested in the particulars of the resurrection, or the transfiguration, or any other kind of -action, or -ation, or -ion.

I don't need any of that. Because this text affirms a table, and it affirms a spirit.

There is a table that cannot be diluted. It's power and its grace increase with every new place setting.

And there is a spirit, at work, that cannot be diluted. God's community, God's world is made more apparent and more present with every new person the spirit emboldens.

It's such a radical, wonderful contradiction: the exclusive makes Caesar's world go round, but the inclusive makes God's go round.

When we remember God's table, we unlock Jesus' radical hospitality. And when we use our hands to bless one another, we unlock that same kind of gifts and the same kind of community that Jesus unlocked two thousand years ago.

And when we channel the radical hospitality of the Christ, and work with the same spirit of the Christ, we resurrect God's presence right here and right now, no matter how far removed we are from Resurrection Sunday.

I know it's a weighty Sunday. We hear about another mass shooting in Virginia. And we read about an utter lack of empathy for neighbors seeking lawful asylum on our borders. And the war hawks keeping ramping up their rhetoric about regions that need to be made more stable. Not to mention all the everyday problems that result from systematic poverty and injustice in our communities.

Don't discount the role of community and worship in alleviating such weighty issues. There is power at the table. And their power in the spirit. The life and work of Jesus, done in a community of believers not much larger than our congregation, transformed the world. Not in miracles. Not in spectacles. Not in trillion-dollar initiatives and infrastructure overhauls. But in love. One bold, simple act at a time.

When we gather in worship, when we break bread, when we sing, when acknowledge one another, we speak truth to a story that's bigger than right now. And we embolden one another to be the Christ that the world needs now.

I think we'd all do well, to think about what happened "last" Thursday, in order that we might make "this" Sunday, and every Sunday, its own kind of resurrection.

May it be so. And may it be soon!

Amen.