

Luke's gospel establishes a pattern, whereby characters who come face-to-face with the divine are initially terrified – they are fearful, and overwhelmed, and afraid, and almost paralyzed in the moment. But they also find assurance in Jesus's shared humanity and shared vulnerability, and that sense of connection empowers lasting and faithful witness.

On Christmas Eve, Luke's gospel reminds us that the shepherds were terrified. I like how the old hymn recounts it:

While shepherds kept their watching
O'er silent flocks by night
Behold throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light

The shepherds feared and trembled
When lo! Above the Earth
Rang out the angel chorus
That hailed our Savior's birth

The shepherds' knee-knocking begins at the appearance of the angel of the Lord and intensifies with the angel's outrageous declaration. But their terror soon turns to joy and elation in seeing a new-born Jesus, swaddled in strips of cloth, laying in a make-shift crib in the middle of a make-shift nursery, held in the arms of a frightened-but-determined young mother. In this very moment, the shepherds know that God has come to share in the human experience, and filled with joy, these shepherds become witnesses – they tell this good news of great joy to all who will listen.

And while the word terrified isn't repeated a lot throughout Luke's gospel, it's certainly mimicked. The disciples are astonished when Jesus helps them reel in the big catch in chapter 5, and so many fish enter their boats that they begin to sink, and Peter cries, "Get away from me O Lord, for I am a sinful man." And James and John and Peter see the absurd when Jesus transfigures on a mountain. And one treacherous day on the lake, the disciples learn that this friend of theirs can tame the waters, even walk on them.

In each instance, fear, and amazement, and even disbelief give way to peace, and accessibility and belief. The disciples are reminded that they are in the presence of God, and that in God's presence extraordinary things can happen. And in each instance, Jesus' human body remains a tangible connection to their own humanity. For they can grasp his Tide-white garment, and they can share a meal around a table, and they can occupy the same space that he does. They have seen, and they have heard, and they have touched, and they can tell others if they so choose.

And in today's text, there's more of the same. Gathered together, perhaps in the same space where they shared the Passover meal, the disciples and their extended friends and family recount tales of Emmaus Road and the empty tomb. And gathered together, telling the story of the one whom they follow, they are startled, terrified to find a ghostly Jesus among them. But they can see his fragile body, one just like theirs, and he requires a meal and companionship and shelter, just like them; and somehow, somehow they are able to see that the resurrected Jesus still contains the pre-resurrected Jesus. That is to say, that somehow, somehow, this transformed Jesus still shares in their humanity, still shares in their vulnerability, still occupies the same space as them.

The gospel of Luke, for me, and even the whole of Israel's faith story, for me, is about the wonderful audacity of God. We worship One who marshals the creative powers of a vast and complex universe, and yet chooses to be revealed to and be expressed in something as simple and tiny as you and me. We are both overwhelmed by God's magnitude and overjoyed by God's investment in us and alongside us. And to imagine that our lives, indeed every life, can be used for God's good purposes, can have inherent value, can literally bring about God's world is terrifying in every sense of the word. And I think throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus introduces us to the tension of holding this weightiness and accountability alongside this freedom and potential.

Who am I, but a lowly shepherd, and yet you allow me to both witness and bear witness to Emanuel? Who am I, but a lowly servant girl, and yet you dare believe I am to be the mother of our Lord? Who are we but mangy fishermen, and seedy tax collectors, and persistent women to get to be your students, and to experience this inbreaking kingdom for ourselves? Who are we, but scared,

scattered, fleeting friends, overwhelmed by the cruelty of Rome's cross, too scared to see the end, to be the ones who get to be witnesses to resurrection?

And Jesus says, to them (and to me and you as well): "You are people, just like me, who can do just as me." In a flash, Jesus reveals the arc of the scriptures, and reminds this group that his story is not separate from Israel's unfolding story but is indeed part of it. This is a credentialing and commissioning. Jesus is telling his friends that they are ready to bring about in Jerusalem the very things he came to do.

And I hope it's not lost on you, that Jesus' penultimate appearance to the disciples happens in a setting where they are gathered together, sharing a meal, and contemplating the very questions he spent his ministry engaging them in. Jesus has made good on the promise of Maundy Thursday. And they (and us, too!) can be assured that the spirit of Jesus will be present each time they (and we!) gather in like manner. Finally, this scene is a wonderful bridge and connector to the next set of stories: The Acts of the Apostles. In the next few pages, buoyed by the events of Pentecost, the disciples and their extended family of faith will expand the Jesus movement.

Jesus says, "You are witnesses to these things." That is, you the earliest disciples, and us, the current iteration of the Jesus movement, and all that follow, are credentialed and empowered story-tellers of God's creative acts in the world. It's our turn!

Let me close with a final thought. Resurrection stories are hard to process with our modern sensibilities. Some of us may get bogged down in the pursuit of autopsy details. Others of us may tie ourselves in knots seeking to determine the precise metaphorical intent of the story's author. Still others of us may just skip on to the next chapter. But I want to invite to keep focusing on this idea of God's audacity.

No matter your belief system, bodily resurrection is a fantastic, incomprehensible idea. Perhaps as incomprehensible, or even as audacious as one man's ability to live in such a way as to negate Rome's domination system. Imagine the hopelessness of Roman occupation. Now imagine this person's radical hospitality,

and his insistent non-conformity to caste system, repeated and consistent in every relationship. And how that commitment negated Rome's ability to rob it most vulnerable and oppressed subjects of their lasting humanity, of their value and dignity as children of God. And even more audacious, the events of a Sunday morning two thousand years ago remind us that we, too, can be agents of such audacity.

For me, the concept of resurrection is less about a body, and it's more about expressing a belief in both God's ability to do audacious, incomprehensible things AND God's desire to bring audacious, incomprehensible things into reality.

So when Jesus joins me at the table, still scarred from Friday, but primed for a lasting future, I believe I can be a witness to some incomprehensible, audacious things, too:

I believe we can create a world where we don't need assault weapons to settle our disputes, nor to temper our grief, desperation, or feelings of abandonment.

I believe that every child in our world can have access to food, shelter, education, healthcare, and love, and that my children and your children can still have more than enough, too!

I believe that we have the collective resources and compassion and creativity to retrain our police officers to stop seeing marginalized persons as threats to target, tase, and shoot, and instead see them as people; people with families, and backstories, and value, and humanity who need to be protected and loved, too. I believe we can create communities that value life more than expired tags and counterfeit twenty-dollar bills.

I believe we can be good stewards of our planet AND economically viable at the same time.

I believe we can create metrics of grace that aren't beholden to the restraints of capitalism.

I believe we can be the people God intended us to be.

Resurrecting Audacity
Bob Stillerman
Third Sunday of Easter, 4/18/2021
Luke 24:36-48



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

I believe this, because Jesus tells us it can be so. And Jesus has shown us it can be so. And I am terrified, because Jesus tells us that we are the ones who can make it so.

I think early in this Easter season, we are still in awe that the scars of Friday have not been the final word. As our tissue hardens, and our resolve strengthens, we hear that we too can help move the world from Friday to Sunday. We are called to be witnesses of a wonderful audacity...God's ongoing restoration and recreation of the world.

Let's break bread. And share our gifts. And be witnesses to an unfolding audacity.

May it be so, and may it begin today!

Amen.