

“Joy, Disbelieving, Still Wondering”
April 26, 2009
Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton
Westhampton Congregational Church, UCC

If you had to choose the *one* thing about you that completely summed you up, what would it be? The parents, or grandparents, among us might define themselves that way. Some of us might define ourselves through our work or, perhaps, by those passions we explore during off hours. I suspect that most of us would find it hard to limit ourselves to one defining quality. Or even two or three. As human beings we are complex and layered.

So, I always find it odd how readily our western culture tends to cut human experience into little parts; and often the fewer, the better. We tend to view things in polarities where two aspects of our experience get placed in opposition to each another. We are taught that our emotional parts are opposed to our thinking parts and that our spiritual parts are opposed to our bodily parts. Social scientists are perennially questioning which experience holds more sway on human development: nature or nurture? Even women and men are juxtaposed—we commonly call the other gender “the *opposite sex*.”

This way of viewing things is clearly laden with the potential for conflict. After all, our cultural outlook is not only often dualistic, but quite competitive as well. When we are offered a choice of opposites we tend to suppose that one must be better than the other. And certain biases are supported by the flaws of our culture as well. Sexism has taught that men are better than women; racism has taught that whites are better than people of color; androcentrism has taught that humans are better than other animals *or* the natural world; heterosexism has discriminated against people of the same gender loving one another, and so forth. Even our religious life as Christians has been shaped by this tendency to think in polarities. Some of the classic Christian polarities include: are humans predestined to behave in certain ways or do we have free will? Is God all powerful or all good? Is the resurrection spiritual or bodily?

This morning’s Gospel story from Luke is wrestling with this last point. I don’t think it reaches a conclusion, either. It begins strangely enough, and then it gets weirder. It starts with the Disciples gathered together after having just heard the story about the walk to Emmaus. So, as they all are turning over possible understandings of *that* resurrection story, Jesus shows up among them. Just like that! No knocking on a door, no sneaking in through an open window; all at once he just appears—poof! It’s a little unsettling for the Disciples. Jesus appears to expect this, because his first action is to calm them down by wishing them peace. It doesn’t work. Instead, they give in to terror, afraid that they have seen a ghost.

He tries to calm them down again by asking them why they are afraid. To assure them that he is not a ghost, he draws their attention to his crucifixion wounds. Now I have to pause here, because I think this is a little odd—how about touching the Disciples on the shoulder, Jesus? Or maybe a nice firm handshake? Wouldn't that let them know that you are not a ghost? Why the reminder about the wounds? Soon enough, Jesus does invite the Disciples to touch *him*, but only after *again* showing them his wounds, as if inviting them to touch these areas specifically.

This seems to have some effect on the Disciples, because they move from being terrified into an array of emotions. They know joy. They experience disbelief. And they revel in wonder. They get caught up in these feelings. It's understandable. It's not every day your dead teacher comes for a visit. No doubt reeling from all these strange circumstances, the Disciples begin reflecting on their experience even as they are having it. They go from wonder to *wondering*. They step outside of the moment by processing it instead of experiencing it. But our man Jesus helps them to return their attention to their shared moment by posing an incredible basic, everyday human sort of question: "Have you anything here to eat?"¹

With six simple words—"have you anything here to eat?"—Jesus yanks them back into the moment with him. He returns their attention to his body instead of allowing them to analyze the spiritual significance of the moment. It works. All of their eyes are on him as he eats the fish. If there was any doubt before, they know for sure that ghosts don't eat. Having caught their attention, Jesus goes further. The scripture says that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures."² Friends, in the interest of true confessions, I will admit freely that I don't know what that means. There is no secret ministerial decoder ring for this piece of the passage. Jesus then reminds the Disciples of his recently concluded earthly mission and the necessity of traveling through Good Friday to get to this moment as the Risen Christ. And it is only *now*, only *after* the resurrection that the Disciples begin to completely understand who Jesus is.

Striving to understand who Jesus is certainly did not stop among the first Disciples. For almost two thousand years Christians have continued to ask one another all sorts of questions about Jesus. Like human beings of all times, we have sometimes gotten caught up in thinking in polarities. Is Jesus fully human? Is Jesus fully God? Oh, and which side do you choose? This passage from Luke leads us to both views. On the one hand, Jesus does miraculous things. He appears among the Disciples in a strange way that makes them think he may be a ghost. On the other hand, Jesus does very human things like inviting them to touch his body. Actual Christ's body also demonstrates a mix of human and divine elements: still bearing the wounds which *took* his life, Jesus *lives* and stands among them. They react in a mix of joy, disbelief and wonder, but

¹ Luke 24:41c.

² Luke 24:45.

then rush to analyze this odd spiritual epiphany, only to be grounded in everyday life again by the request for a snack, which he eats just like an everyday human being.

Every time that the Disciples seem to be reaching a conclusion about the nature of Jesus, they are brought in a new direction by Jesus himself. The witness of Christ's life and actions leads Disciples of every era to have to keep an open mind about who he is. Which I think is exactly the point. We like to make those little divisions in our lives—between men and women, between us and them, between one so-called “side” of the political spectrum and the other. But Jesus comes to break us out of that limited and lazy way of thinking.

Jesus models to us a holistic embrace of experience—not a dividing view, but a uniting and transcending view. Jesus models a perspective that pulls us away from analyzing and dividing our experiences, and encourages us to embrace actual raw experience more fully. I think this is the meaning of the life abundant into which Jesus calls us: a place where we experience life more fully because we allow ourselves to embrace it without opposing or judging or naming our experience. There is a fundamental change in understanding when things we believed to be held in opposition to one another suddenly unite into pure experience that is beyond labels and limitation. When we cease from wondering and analyzing, and give into wonder itself.

All the best stuff in life happens in that magical place. Have you been there? Have you had those visits with friends or family where time flew, and your sense of burden and schedule simply melted away? Do you remember the joys of childhood where afternoons could be endless, and lifetimes could be lived in a day? For some of us, we still live there. Have you known the mystical presence of a lover melting time and wrapping your life in joy, disbelief, and wonder? I hope you all have, or that you will. Those moments are the very life of life: when we touch the edge of eternity and are opened up to new and endless possibilities.

That sort of openness to possibility necessarily bears with it a radical openness to God, to God's presence in our lives, and to our presence in God's life. Likewise, openness to possibilities means we become more receptive to other people...and to the world around us...and other creatures. At a certain point the dividing lines between ourselves, God, and others become indistinguishable, just as the edge of the divinity in Jesus and the edge of his humanity mix and blend freely. The Apostle Paul tells us in the letter to the Galatians that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”³ And through being one with Jesus, we are also called into oneness with God.

And that's the good news of the Gospel this morning: Jesus strives to unite us with one another and with God. He modeled it for us throughout his life, but we finally began piecing it together

³Galatians 3:28

after his resurrection, which is a model for our own. We are called by our good and loving God not to get caught up in the polarities of things, but to embrace the gift of life abundant in joy, disbelief, and wonder!

Amen.

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 37They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39Look 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.” 40And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” 42They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43and he took it and ate in their presence. 44Then 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.” 45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things.