

Look at My Hand and Feet

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

April 16, 2023 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Luke 24:36-49

Why are you troubled and why do doubts STILL rise in your minds? That's the question that jabs us in this passage. In one of his books John Ortberg tells the story of a Bible study he had with a bunch of really bright guys from his church. One week they were studying 2 Kings 6. That's the story where the Arameans surrounded the house of the prophet Elisha intending to kill him. Elisha's servant looked out the window and saw the enemy surrounding them and thought he was going to die. But Elisha prayed for the servant's eyes to be opened and when he looked again he saw a mighty army of the Lord's chariots, each one with an angel at the helm, all surrounding the enemy. This supernatural revelation made him see that he was safe and that he had nothing to fear. They read that story and then the leader asked the question: 'How would you respond if you were in the place of that servant and this happened to you?' And after a second of thinking about that one of the Bible study members, a really bright guy who had been a Christian his whole life said, "I would be surprised to find out that what I believed all along turned out to be true."

That's an interesting response. 'I would be surprised to find out that what I've believed my whole life turned out to be true all along.' I think many of us – most of us? all of us? – can understand this response. The man who said this admitted that he was a believer, but he was also an unbeliever. He believed in the gospel, and he had always gone to church, but there was part of him which was still hesitating and doubting.

It reminds me of the disciples in this passage. By the time Jesus shows up in their room in Jerusalem, they've heard about his resurrection multiple times. In Luke's telling of the story, they've heard about it at least three times. They've heard it from the women who first came to the tomb, they've heard about the empty tomb from Peter, and they've heard it from the two men who walked the Emmaus road. On top of that, Jesus himself had said at least three times: 'I will be crucified, but in three days I will rise again.' The 11 disciples have had all sorts of testimony to the resurrection, and yet when Jesus finally does show up in their room, they still don't really believe it. They think he's a ghost. You might say they're surprised to find that what everyone, including Jesus, has been telling them has been true all along.

Jesus is obviously frustrated with their slow and hesitating faith "Why do doubts still rise in your minds!!!???" He loves these men, but he wishes that they wouldn't always have these fearful reactions in stressful situations. "Guys! Again with the fear and the doubt?! Oy. All right. Come here, let me show you a couple of things." Jesus holds out his hands and shows them his wounds. "Come on grab them. Don't worry I'm not a cold mist! Your hands won't go through! I'm made of flesh and blood, just like you." And then seeing they're still struggling Jesus says, "Food! I need food! Give me something to eat." They give him a piece of boiled fish and he eats it. Jesus puts the real food into his real mouth, chews it with his real teeth and swallows it with his real throat, all in an attempt to show them that the resurrection is real. By the end of the passage it seems as though they might finally be convinced. They're starting to change. At the beginning of the passage, Jesus sees that they are beset by fear and doubt. By the end of the passage, and by the end of the gospel of Luke they are praising God with great joy in the temple.

What we see in the disciples and in John Ortberg's friend and in ourselves tells us that there are different ways that the resurrection can take root in your life. You can be a believer in the power of the resurrection, but that belief can inhabit your life at different levels. Let me illustrate.

In many summer camps, they have what they call high ropes courses. These are obstacle courses that invite you to do a series of physical tasks, like walking a balance beam or jumping from platform to platform without losing your balance. But all this is done 40 feet off the ground. The only thing that might make anyone willing to walk a narrow board 35 feet off the ground is that you are strapped in to a safety harness. If you fall, you will not die, because the safety harness will catch you and you will simply dangle in midair, embarrassed, but otherwise unscathed.

Now in my high ropes experience people approach the ropes in three different ways. There are those who come to the course and watch from the ground. They've heard of high ropes courses and they are curious

about what these activities look like, but they're not interested in trying them. They believe that it is probably safe, but that belief is not enough to get them up there. They are going to stay safe and sound with their two feet on the ground, thank you very much. That's the disciples in the beginning of this passage. They've heard about the resurrection, but that news hasn't caused them to take any risks. That news isn't influencing their behavior. They're in fear and safety mode. The little bit of belief that they might have is overwhelmed and paralyzed by their fears.

The second type of high ropes course person is someone who gets up on the ropes and who does them, but who does them very slowly and carefully in a constant state of fear and caution. 'Oh my goodness, I can't believe I'm doing this!' They believe the harness will save them if they fall, but they are NOT going to put that harness to the test. They are not completely paralyzed, but their behavior is still mostly governed by fear and caution. These people are maybe a little bit like the disciples in the middle of this story. In verse 41 you have that interesting phrase: the disciples still did not believe because of joy and amazement. How could joy and amazement cause disbelief. It all seems too good to be true. They love what they're seeing, but they don't give themselves to it, they can't completely trust it. There is more belief, but it's still dominated by fear and doubt. I wonder if this is also the posture of the man in John Ortberg's Bible study.

Finally, you will also have people at the ropes course who move through the challenges with confidence. They walk across the balance beam like they're walking down the sidewalk. They leap from platform to platform without hesitation. Usually these are the people who run the ropes course, the supervisors and instructors. They have complete and utter confidence in their safety harness. They don't have to summon up that belief before they take another step. They don't have to convince themselves that it's going to be OK. That belief is deep in their bones and so they move through the air with joy and confidence. What's that like? That's like the disciples at the end of the gospel of Luke who move into the temple and are there every day, praising God. That's like the disciples in the book of Acts after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Preaching in Jerusalem, preaching in Athens, facing danger and persecution with joy. These were people for whom the resurrection wasn't just a peripheral belief. It was deep in their bones and governed their life.

What kind of disciple do we want to be? The third kind of course! We all want that, don't we? The people who can move through life's challenges with joy and hope. We don't want to be doubters! We want to walk the tightrope of our days with joy and confidence. What kind of disciple does Jesus want us to be? He wants us to be the third kind too. And in this passage we can hear his loving frustration with these disciples because they are still stuck in stage one, wrestling with their fears and doubts.

But in this passage we can also see him moving the disciples along, pushing them out of stage one and stage 2. Moving them toward that beautiful stage when the resurrection was deep in their bones. How did he do that? We want that resurrection confidence? How did Jesus start to inspire resurrection confidence in these men? How did he deepen them?

By the beginning of this passage, God has already given the disciples two things that testify to the resurrection. And notice, these testimonies are all made of words. First, he's sent witnesses. At least 5 different people have told them that Christ is risen. Second, he's given them the Bible. In verse 44 Jesus says, haven't I already taught you how the law and the Prophets and the Psalms all point to my resurrection? So they've had the evidence of the Bible and the witnesses. Do these word-based evidences convince the disciples? They do not. By Jesus' own testimony, they are still ruled by fear and doubt. But here Jesus adds another piece of evidence, one that seems to move them along! This one seems to change them. What does Jesus give them and show them in this passage that changes them? It's not words this time. He shows them his physical body. He shows them his hands and feet. He eats a piece of fish. He shows them his physical body. And that seems to work, that's what moves them from fear and doubt to joy and worship.

Which is maybe not so surprising. Of course the physical presence of Jesus convinced them! Of course having Jesus alive right in front of them, talking to them in the flesh, convinced them of the resurrection! If only we could have that! Instead of me standing up here and dumping all these words on you, if only Jesus would walk into the middle of this service and show us his hands and feet. If only we could come up and hug him, or have him lay his hand on us and bless us, have him look us in the eye like he does to the disciples and say, "Hey, don't be afraid. I'm right here." That would chase our doubts and fears away! Surely if we had the resurrected body of Jesus right here, we would move from doubt and fear to joy and worship.

But actually we do have that. We do have the body of Jesus. We are the body of Christ. The church is the body of Christ. You and me and all of us together, we are the body of Christ in the world. His resurrection power and his resurrection life is in us. WE are his hands; we are his feet. And when our mouths speak his words of encouragement and hope, when our hands do his works of kindness and support, when our hearts are filled with his Spirit, then the resurrected body still shows itself in the world.

And just as it was the evidence of the resurrection that fully convinced the disciples in this passage, it's also this bodily witness to the resurrection contained in the life of the church that is key to the passing of faith. This physical, body of Christ part of the testimony, is key to making the resurrection real to ourselves, to our children and to the world. We can tell our children the Bible stories over and over again until they know them backward and forward. We can teach them all the doctrines, we can inundate them with words, but if our children don't experience this community as a place of love and care and hope, if our children don't experience this place as a place of peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; if the life of Jesus isn't embodied in the works of our hands and hearts and mouths, then the faith of our children will always be this hesitating doubting thing that we see in the disciples at the beginning of this passage. That's not to say that teaching and Biblical instruction aren't centrally important; they are. But without the witness of the body of the resurrected Lord through the love and care of the community, the witness loses its strength. They need to see the body of the resurrected Jesus show itself through us.

So far, I've framed this like it's a challenge, a call to action, and it is. But of course, as with all of God's work, this passage is a gift before it is a call. I can urge us to deeper faith and I can call us to a deeper faith that embodies the resurrected Lord, but that's not where our hope comes from. Where does the change power come in this passage? Is it from the will of the disciples to be better people? Or from the determination and patience of Jesus? From Jesus of course. He will not let fear and doubt rule them. He loves these disciples, and he will not let them stay imprisoned in these fearful, half-hearted lives. He will free them. He will change us whether it means dying on a cross, sending His spirit, or sometimes shaking up our lives and teaching us to trust. Jesus will not rest until our fear and doubt turns to wonder, love and praise.

And Jesus is still showing himself among his disciples. During the last few years we've been through a few contentious issues as a community and as a denomination. You all know that. The place where those contentious issues were dealt with was our council meetings. That's council's job. That means that some of these council meetings were tense and difficult, and sometimes when they were done, I would be worn out and I confess that I would feel a fair bit of fear and doubt. I wasn't the only one.

But then, right after the council meeting, we would have our elders meeting, and in that elders meeting we would hear reports of the body of Christ caring for each other: Elder visits made to people where encouragement was shared, needs of congregation members - sicknesses, losses - were brought up and prayed for. We heard reports of pastoral care assistants visiting shut-ins. We heard stories of people who were helping each other through crises. In other words, we heard reports of the body of Christ being the hands and feet and mouth of God. Every time this happened I felt my fear and doubt recede and I felt my faith and hope grow.

What happened there? Jesus was showing me his hands and his feet. Jesus was showing me his resurrected body. We worry and fret over the future, but underneath it all and through it all, wherever people are loving each other, caring for each other and praying for each other, Christ shows his resurrected body and just like the disciples in our passage, we are reminded that his love is stronger, and we don't need to be afraid.

©Rev. Peter Jonker