“Certainty vs. Fidelity”
Luke 24: 36-48

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From the Pulpit
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Reflecting on Luke 24: 36-48

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift and presence of Christ who was raised from the dead and glorified. Let the words of scripture fulfilled in Jesus find a place within our hearts and open our minds to recognize him in the breaking of bread and our wrestling with the word. Amen.

It’s two weeks after Easter and it’s also the evening of the resurrection. Jesus came along side of two men who were walking to Emmaus from Jerusalem. He walked with them. He recognized them, but they didn’t know him. The turning point of this story came when he said, "Peace be with you." Like you or me facing a very unexpected thing, they were startled and afraid, and thought that they were seeing a spirit or ghost. They were certain that he had been crucified and that he was dead. They were certain that they had seen him cut down from the cross. On the road they became uncertain. His words were familiar ones. He had often offered that blessing, “Peace be with you.” On this walk, he talked about their common experiences of fidelity and relationship. He talked about love and inclusion. Think about how often Jesus talked about love. It’s as if love is the
glue of fidelity, the stuff that keeps relationships relating. Jesus was there to be in relationship.

When I speak of certainty, I’m talking about an absence of doubt, an absence of wonder or question. When I speak of fidelity, I think of the fidelity of marriage – the desire for relationship and a pledge of loyalty.

He said to them, "Why are you afraid, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see. Then he added, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of fish and honeycomb, and he ate with them. It seems these disciples were grappling with knowing what is certain. They had spent two years with Jesus, learning about love and radical hospitality. Here, they learned that the risen Christ is real. He comes in the flesh. He is the person they know, yet he is not the same. His message sounds the same, yet everything is very different because of his death and resurrection.

Do you feel more like these travelers leaving Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus, or the disciples locked in a room? Either way, there was a whole lot of uncertainty in the air, and so many questions of fidelity. Who do I trust? Who can I be in relationship with? Those are questions that are as true for us today as for the disciples. Like the disciples, you
and I fear, question, listen, and journey, while also feeding and being fed.

After eating, he said, "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."

What is written in the law, the prophets, and the psalms are messages about relationship. They are messages about God’s fidelity to creation – from the beginning of time when humans were created in the image of God. They are messages about justice. They are messages that are multi-layered, multi-voiced, complex and conflicted. They are messages that describe God and humans, who are multi-layered, multi-voiced, complex and conflicted.

They are messages from Micah, *This is what the Lord requires: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God*; from Isaiah, *Quit doing evil and learn to do good. What is good? Seek justice, relieve the oppressed*; Hosea’s message, *I desired mercy, and not sacrifice. I wanted you to know me, not bring burnt offerings to me*; and from Jesus, *Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

Time is short. There is much to do. This is not the end of Jesus’ teachings, but the beginning of something new! Jesus was preparing them for their mission not just to the people
of Israel but to the entire world. He’d been working on this for some time, but they were clearly not quite ready. They needed something more. They needed transformation, dramatic transformation. We still have work to do toward transformation – to fully embrace the fidelity of God. We still have work to do to address Jesus’ last supper message to love one another.

Jesus broke bread and ate fish, just like he did many times, with his disciples and the thousands who gathered to hear him. The gospel tells us that seeing Jesus, being with him, and sharing the Word together, opened the disciples' hearts and minds. Today, Jesus continues to show up, often incarnationally as the person bringing love and grace, and always in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup. And yet, how easy it is that his messages to open our arms and hearts to love become perverted by cautions and certainties about some sinful nature of humans.

Jesus opened their minds so they could finally connect the dots and discover that all of Scripture—the whole Bible as they then knew it—had found its way in him. If you know who Jesus is, you see how within his person and ministry and now in his resurrected presence every word, every story, every promise, every prophecy finds its way straight to him and his teachings. And what did he teach most often – love one another!
In *Christianity after Religion*, Diana Butler Bass points out that half of all Americans identify as both “spiritual and religious.” She says for this group “belief springs from experience.” In writings of the early church, the Latin word *credo*, meaning “I set my heart upon,” described an experience of religious believing. Medieval English translated *credo* to believe, meaning to prize or treasure, to *belove* something or someone as an act of trust or loyalty. Belief sounds a lot like a marriage vow (*Christianity after Religion*, 117). There is a connection between believe, belove, and faith.

Our experiential faith is gritty and fleshy and tangible and involves nothing short of the renewal of all things: lakes, mountains, tadpoles, tangerines, and real human bodies. It also involves the renewal of reflection and fidelity. I see reflection and collaboration in tension with certainty. Reflection and collaboration oppose seeing the world and life as a win-lose encounter. I experience certainty as brittle and unbending, whereas fidelity is fluid and dynamic.

To Christians, Christ’s resurrection matters. It is rooted in creation and the fidelity of God for all people. Love and justice matter for all people.
On April 28th, the United States Supreme Court is scheduled to hear arguments related to the rights of citizens to marry. More than 2,000 faith leaders have signed a brief to the Court, making the case that all families in the country need the freedom to marry. The life and resurrection of Jesus are connected to marriage equality.

Even though a minority of Americans describe themselves as religious, they are still concerned about matters of faith. They want to know that there’s still a church on the corner and that it represents the presence of God in their neighborhood. They want to know that faith leaders have something to say about the fidelity of marriage. Many want to believe in something that is clearly defined (certain) and leaves little room for doubt.

In the preface of his book *Holy Terror*, Mel White retells the story of Gary Matson and Winfield Scott Mowder. Matthew and Tyler Williams broke into the home of Matson and Mowder. The next day the men’s bodies were found riddled with bullets. They were killed for one reason – they were gay. When Matthew Williams was asked why he had killed “the two homos,” he replied, “I had to obey God’s law rather than man’s law.” To Williams, the threat of homosexuals “to the family, to the church and to the nation” made it okay to eliminate them as a threat (*Holy
Terror}, Preface). In his trial, Williams claimed his allegiance to a “higher law.” Today the politically active religious right continues to claim a higher law that fears the acceptance of people who are lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, or queer. I find this ironic because these same religious folk use the authority of the Bible for making life decisions. What I do not find in their literal interpretations of the Bible is a consideration for centuries of learning about the growing and changing mystery and wonderment of God and God’s creation. What I hear is certainty about truth. What is missing is regard for the intent of the writers to lift up the fidelity of God toward God’s people. I struggle when I try to dialogue with a person who argues, “God said it. I believe it. That’s all there is.”

But that is not all there is! Fidelity is not just about relationships between one man and one woman. Fidelity is between man and man, woman and woman, and God and all people. There are no buts, as in “I accept that you are gay, just don’t flaunt it.” The fidelity of God is not conditional.

I used to think that my verbal and prayerful commitment of fidelity to Sandra was enough and all there needed to be. I used to think that I was not affected by what the state or
federal government said about the love I knew that I shared with Sandra. I took the 14th amendment for granted. My certainty was transformed to deeper love and fidelity when we were married in our nation’s capital. To be equal in the eyes of the law makes a difference. It really does matter. If I take any Biblical text literally, I see that the contextual laws that speak of abomination are trumped by Jesus’ greatest commandment to “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

How shall we engage each other in emotionally tense issues? I want to sit knee to knee with others to learn from them what drives them toward or away from being in relationship. I want us to share stories of our children and loved ones, to know that they care about theirs as much as I care about mine. I want to find the one square foot of common ground on which we stand together. I want to regard and be regarded for our shared human concerns and experiences. I want the law of love and grace as our guide as we sit together to share a loaf of bread and a cup of wine.
If you remember anything from this message, please remember that God is love and the nature of love is to open wide one’s arms in relationship. In the love of God there are no margins, no insiders or outsiders; there is a holy, holy, holy reach of love experienced as extravagant inclusion.

When I say that the love of God means arms wide open to behold the other, it means that compassion trumps law. An important message of Jesus’ life was this: It is more lawful to meet human need than to let human suffering go on unnecessarily. The critics who are certain look for places to criticize and detract from Jesus’ work. Those who seek to be in faithful relationship with God, with one another, and with all of creation, know that relationships are important. They also know they are risky. They require vulnerability and humility. They require grace.

Jesus asked the two disciples, “Why do you doubt?” He was not chastising them. I think he was saying it’s okay to question. In fact, to question and doubt is probably integral to faith. In light of all the death and trauma and disappointment and tragedy that enters life, if you don’t have at least some difficulty believing the promise that God not only raised Jesus from the dead, but also promises new life and second chances and forgiveness and grace to all, then where and how does faith form and transform you and me?
Having said all this, I wonder how you and I will live differently after hearing the resurrection stories. If it’s true that God raised Jesus from the dead… If it’s true that God promises to renew all of creation and create new life… If it’s true that nothing – nothing we’ve done or has been done to us – can separate us from the love of God… If it’s true that God will not turn God’s back on any of us but always reaches out to us in grace, mercy, and forgiveness… If any of this – let alone all of this – is true, then how might we live our lives differently? How might this trusting, courageous faith change how we look at our relationships (including marriage), our politics, our work, our resources, and our future?

I leave you with the promise that love and grace are so radical, so uncommon, and so desperately necessary that it has always elicited a measure of doubt. But they have also always elicited changed lives. Thanks be to God!

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