

Luke 24: 36-48 (NRSV)

36 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

38 He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?”

39 Look 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.”

40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”

42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then 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.”

45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

46 and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,

47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things.

The Invitation of Jesus

I remember a business trip I took to Mexico City in 2005. That trip was memorable because it was the first time I traveled alone. Up until that point, I had always traveled with someone or had someone waiting for me. Even if I was on an airplane alone, it wasn't frightening or intimidating because I was already in contact with someone from the company or a contractor.

However, my business trip to Mexico was different. My supervisor was attacked at the Mexico City bus terminal, and his money and belongings were taken. He had barely made it to an area called Pueblas, but he couldn't get his work done, so he called me. It was my first time in the city, where no one would greet me, and the two-hour public transportation ride to Pueblas was very unfamiliar.

I had just landed at the Mexico City airport after completing customs.

I was nervous as I looked at the airport restrooms because my supervisor had told me to be careful.

I was also nervous as I walked to the bus terminal, which was a 10-minute walk from the airport. Taxi drivers approached me to take their cabs.

I was very nervous. It wasn't a language issue. It wasn't about information, because I had heard many stories from colleagues and managers who had traveled to Mexico. I had cash on hand, but I also had a credit card, and I had traveler's checks just in case. I think it was a kind of "fear" of being away from the group and having to do it all on my own for the first time. (I was alone, and that made me fear, and nervous)

I wonder if this "fear" is what the disciples felt when they met the risen Jesus.

They were "not" people with a strong connection to some recognized group or organization that would have given their ministry social status. It would have been easier for the disciples if they were like the Pharisees, scribes, or religious leaders to begin with. Because those people were in a position of leadership by class or title.

But these disciples of Jesus, the eleven, it seems, had no such rank.

They had met Jesus three years before.

They had spent meaningful time with Jesus.

When Jesus defeated the religious leaders who challenged him and tried to disprove his teachings, the disciples must have been pleased; they must have been encouraged.

Jesus' teachings must have always seemed right and great.

The disciples would have never once thought of themselves as separate from Jesus.

Then, they lost Jesus on the cross. Sure, then they met the resurrected Jesus.

But now, they must have felt that they had to go their own way, independent from Jesus.

Perhaps that fear was a very real fear, different from the fear-filled business trip to Mexico that I had. The disciples realized that they would have to do what Jesus had been teaching them independently. They realized that Jesus wasn't always with them.

In the book of John, we find a scene similar to today's story.

It's about the risen Lord appearing to seven disciples, including Peter, while they were fishing in the Lake of Galilee.

He's risen, and they're back to their original occupation.

Perhaps they were afraid that they couldn't do ministry like the Lord did.

They weren't religious leaders to begin with, and they probably didn't have the confidence or courage that Jesus did to fulfill the ministry.

In today's story from the Gospel of Luke, the disciples rejoiced at meeting the risen Jesus.

In the midst of their worries and concerns, Jesus appears to them.

Jesus showed them that he had a physical body, that he was resurrected, and that he could eat food.

Then, Jesus enlightens them about the Scriptures and tells them that their teacher, Jesus Christ, is the true Messiah, that his suffering, death, and resurrection, and the repentance (enlightenment) that will result, will be preached from Jerusalem to all the nations.

As Jesus shares all of this good news with his disciples here today, he invites them to be witnesses to the gospel.

His invitation is not made because of their social status.

Jesus' invitation doesn't seem to have been made because they had great faith. The disciples were afraid.

Jesus' invitation was not made because they were ready; it had to be explained to them over and over again through the Scriptures.

Jesus invited these incomplete disciples to be witnesses of Jesus.

Jesus encourages them to go where they have never gone before, alone.

The invitation to be Jesus' witness is a worthy one, but there is also the challenge of overcoming fear. So, Jesus tells them that they will be empowered when the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

As I reflected on this passage, I got to thinking a bit about what it means to be a Methodist in these times.

Just 20 or 30 years ago, this church was a very large congregation. I've heard that in the 1960s, the church had over 300 members, and when I look at the archives and photos from that time, I think about how "courageous" the members of the church must have been.

The church must have been vibrant and confident as witness for Jesus Christ.

And yet, as we live today, we have fear.

Fear of whether this church will continue.

There's a fear of whether we can regain the previous glory.

We worry about the future because we see the church in its current state of weakness and frailty, not the glory and fullness of its past.

Our ancestors(ex-church members who are in the glory) probably never had to worry about this, as we have.

They probably never thought that the church would become smaller and smaller.

Just like the disciples never thought that Jesus would ever leave or die.

Thus, the resurrection must have been a shock to the disciples: joyful, but also a new path for them to follow as witnesses to the Master. The Lord's encouragement and support for them speaks to you and me today.

It is the story of the most essential reason the church exists: the story of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

We are all people who have professed faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we are still people invited by Jesus to be witnesses, and we are still the messengers of that joyful good news.

Therefore, dear friends, take courage. We are going on a path that has never been traveled before. We have to think about the future of the church and worry about it. We have to worry about money and we have to worry about our members. But if there is one thing we must never forget, it is to remember the only thing we can remember: the invitation to be a witness for Jesus Christ.

As we wrap up today's story, I invite you to recall stories of your own experiences with Jesus, whether directly or indirectly. That Jesus may have been experienced through a Sunday school teacher. You may have experienced Jesus through your parents or pastor, through friends or strangers. And you might have been a little Jesus yourself, sharing the love of Jesus with someone. I invite you to be encouraged by those memories.

The Lord calls us to be witnesses, and Jesus reminds us that we can do all of this with the Holy Spirit. Let's remember Jesus' teaching to rely on the Holy Spirit, the very essence of power. So, let's go forth and witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit. And God will take care of the rest. Amen. Let us pray.

Now, let us reflect on the Lord's disciples as they traveled a strange road without their leader. Jesus blessed them with "Peace" and assured them that they would receive the courage to witness for Him through the Holy Spirit. May God give us courage today. We used to think that the church was courageous and strong when it was big and full of people, but we realize that it is living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that gives us true courage and strength. Help us to remember this invitation to be your witnesses, and give us the courage and boldness to embrace those who are living without you and suffering. We will do that, Lord, so watch over this church.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.