

Easter 3, Year B
1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

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Problem in the Text

On Easter Sunday, we heard from John's Gospel about three women on their way to anoint their beloved's dead body. We walked with them through the early morning dimness and found the stone rolled away, an empty tomb, and the news that Jesus had risen from the dead. Last week we again heard from John's Gospel about Jesus appearing to his disciples and we stood close to this risen Christ with Thomas as his fingers touched the wounds on Jesus. This third Sunday of Easter, we encounter the risen Jesus again but from a different vantage point. In Luke's Gospel, the disciples are in the middle of hearing about Jesus appearing to Simon and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus. I think we can imagine the scene: the two disciples had just run into the room bursting with joy even in their exhaustion from the run back from Emmaus. They would have been hard to understand as the two wept and laughed and gone over each detail in an effort to convince their friends that they had walked and talked with a man for nearly seven miles and then only recognized him to be Jesus – alive again - when he broke the bread. The disciples who had remained behind would have been agitated and their wounds of grief reopened, as they listened. How is this possible? What does this mean – Jesus is resurrected? Why couldn't the two friends recognize their beloved Rabbi, master, and dear friend?

Then suddenly, Jesus is there among them.

Luke's gospel tells us that the disciples' "were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." That sounds like a perfectly valid response. They had heard Simon and Cleopas' story of the encounter in Emmaus and they could maybe connect that with stories of ghosts and spirits. Now the ghost is with them! That would be what their minds would have grasped for in their terror and confusion. I doubt the disciples in that crowded room could even process Jesus' greeting of "Peace be with you." Don't ghosts usually say, "Boo!"?

Over the past year I've been working through a very popular book by Reza Aslan, *Zealot: the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth*. It is a work that is part of the "Historical Jesus" movement of scholars who focus on what we know about Jesus through the archeological and historical record, aside from scripture.

The book is fascinating for learning about what life was like in Jesus' time socially and politically. Aslan is a Muslim, who was Christian as a young adult and then returned to his family's traditional faith of Islam. Interspersed with the scholarly reflections on Jewish life under the Romans in Judea, he makes many jabs at disproving Jesus's holiness, poo-pooing the apostles and their mission to convert others as just some kind of Judaism-meets-Gentile world view phenomenon.

On the topic of the Resurrection, Aslan acknowledges that "the disciples faced a profound test of their faith after Jesus' death." If the story ended with Jesus crucified, it meant that he was just another rebel of the many executed for trying to overthrow the Roman occupation. Aslan writes, "Then something extraordinary happened. What exactly that something was is impossible to know...Jesus' resurrection is an exceedingly difficult topic for the historian to discuss, not least because it falls beyond the scope of any examination of the historical Jesus...there is a nagging fact to consider: one after another of those who claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus went to their own gruesome deaths refusing to recant their testimony."¹

The disciples and followers of Jesus had witnessed something incredible, that the world would say "defies all logic, reason, and sense"ⁱⁱ and they were willing to die for it. I believe they saw what Luke's Gospel tells us: Jesus with the wounds that killed him still visible, flesh and bone, eating broiled fish, and alive with holiness.

Problem in the World

Imagine Jesus appearing at this moment in this very room. Some of us would clamor to touch him, like Thomas. Some of us would recoil in fear in that first moment, like these disciples in Luke's Gospel. I have been in a few

extreme situations, so I imagine my first reaction would be very me: momentary blindness and falling to my knees for lack of a better place to collapse. Jesus appearing really is a life or death situation – the encounter with the risen Jesus forces us to acknowledge the Holy and choose life in Christ, or death in the world. Some choose not to believe. I think that has been an easier choice the further we get from an event that happened 2,000 years ago. If a person is culturally Christian, perhaps even baptized, but never comes to church, never reads scripture, or never engages in theological questions about life, they are not encountering the risen Jesus. Such a person would say that Jesus had died to make some point, maybe they know that Easter celebrates Jesus' resurrection, but they would not have a clue about what the risen Jesus has to do with their life. As we read in the First Letter of John, "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him" (v. 3:2.) If the world does not encounter the risen Christ, how can they know him? If Jesus appeared to all of us in this room, the world would rather believe we'd seen a ghost.

Grace in the Text

But that is just the point that Luke makes in his Gospel. This was no ghost, no spirit, come to haunt and frighten the disciples. This was Jesus, fully flesh and bone and life. This resurrected Jesus was so alive that he was hungry. The disciples gave him "a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence." This resurrected Jesus was more alive than even the disciples who stood and watched him eat. God had worked something completely new to the experience of the world: that which was once completely other as God, had become a man who suffered, died, and buried in a tomb. In the resurrection, the otherness of God and the flesh became one. The body of Jesus had become holy in its resurrection. As theologian Leander Keck put it, "Before the holy we are in the presence of something that is more real than we are, and it is we who are revitalized by God."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus was alive but revitalized and in his holy resurrected self, more alive than anyone ever before.

The disciples wrestled with what the risen Jesus standing before them meant. In response, Jesus gave them their commission: Luke wrote, "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." The struggle to understand this flesh and bone resurrected Jesus continued among the early Christians. Jesus, born of Mary in the incarnation was Emmanuel, God with us and fully human. Jesus resurrected is God's "wholly other-ness" merged with our human flesh. It is new creation, perfected being, free from sin, corruption, and death in the person of Jesus. We have the promise that this is to be for us as well. The First Epistle of John was written to counter Docetism, the 1st century belief that Jesus did not come in the flesh but was pure spirit. The author wrote, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are... Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:1-3.) The early Christians continued as witnesses to insist upon the resurrection as the disciples proclaimed the story and died for it – Jesus rose from the dead and appeared not as a spirit, but as flesh and bone and holy.

Grace in the World

We carry on that witness. We are the current generation of "witnesses to these things" and are under the same charge as those disciples who stood trembling with joy and wonder. We proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to the world, so that all nations can encounter the risen Jesus. Repentance and forgiveness means the bonds of sin and death have been broken. We have a share of the resurrection as children of God, and it brings us real life that is healed and redeemed. As the disciples began that witness from Jerusalem, we continue it from Grace Church so the world may encounter the risen Jesus and know him.

Amen.

ⁱ Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Random House 2013), p. 174.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leander Keck, *Who is Jesus: History in Perfect Tense* (Fortress Press: 2001), p.135.