

A Sermon For DaySpring

By Eric Howell

With People

Luke 24

April 14, 2024

This week, Jenny and I spent several days in eastern Oklahoma leading an Easter season retreat for pastors, missionaries, and church folks from all over the West, from Arkansas to Arizona and California. Almost everyone who arrived there Monday evening had made their way one way or another into the path of eclipse totality earlier in the day. And the room was buzzing from the experience. So were we. The eclipse was one of the coolest things I've ever seen, and one of the coolest experiences I've ever had. To share that with family and neighbors and seemingly, everyone across the country made it even more special. At a nursing home in Ft. Worth where my mom is staying, they wheeled all the residents out into the courtyard and gave each one the special glasses so they could enjoy it. She said she loved the experience. I talked with someone this week who said they bawled through the whole eclipse, and had to wipe their eyes so they could see it.

I'd seen partial eclipses before. I have a memory of elementary school looking through one of those viewfinders in a cardboard box to see the shadow fall on the cardboard. And of course, we enjoyed watching the one that passed over Texas last fall. But nothing prepares you for a full eclipse. Nothing can prepare you for being part of that experience. You may have seen some awesome phenomena; you may have seen a partial eclipse, even a 95% eclipse, but there's nothing that can fully prepare you for the experience of totality. It's not hard to understand why ancient people seeing a full eclipse would suspect that the world was ending.

If you shared any of that feeling, that meeting point of physics and mysticism, gratitude and wonder and awe-- remember that, because I'm going to make a jump here across space and time and experience. I think the eclipse—not the physical planetary alignment necessarily, but the experience of it—helps us connect with today's gospel reading. Think about the disciples in our gospel reading for today--nothing can prepare them for what they are seeing. We know a little bit of what that feels like right now. That's the sense you get from the reading. They see it. They believe what they are seeing. But, still, what's happening here? This can't be real. They see Jesus in front of their eyes. They hear Jesus speak to them. But, but . . .what's happening?

They'd seen a lot of amazing things that exceeded their prior experience of the world until now. Just in Luke's gospel, they'd seen Jesus heal people who'd been blind or paralyzed their whole lives, calm a raging storm, feed thousands. They'd seen him be transfigured. It's not that their life with him was mundane until this. It was anything but mundane. They'd seen such amazing things and heard him speak enough to know that he wasn't like anyone or anything they'd ever known. Yet, still, even given all of that, daily life with Jesus for 3 years, even given all of that, 95% of Jesus' story is not 95% of the gospel. Like a partial

eclipse is not even half of the full thing. What could prepare you for the resurrection—to see him, who was crucified just days ago, now standing with you, speaking to you? Alive.

Here's how they are described: startled, terrified, frightened, joyful, disbelieving, amazed. A whole range of reactions and emotions all at once. How silly would it sound if one of them were to say: “This is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen”? It’s far more than that, far far more than a natural phenomenon, more than any eclipse or anything else we might see or imagine, with far more implications for their lives and everything they thought they believed or understood about the world and about God. Here is Jesus, resurrected from the dead, and everything changes.

For his part, Jesus asks them, “Why are you frightened? It’s me.” This is the big emphasis. It’s not a ghost or an apparition; it’s not a figment of imagination or wishful thinking, it’s not an *idea* of resurrection or a vague notion of warm feelings where the memory of a person lives on in the collective consciousness of those who love them. It’s not dreamlike or transcendence of life into a form that extends the spirit of the movement.

This is a major point here. It’s me. Luke says, “Jesus *himself* stood among them.” Jesus “himself”. There’s continuity here. They knew Jesus and now it’s Jesus “himself.” Jesus says the same thing: “Look at my hands and my feet; see that I am myself.” There’s continuity here with the one they have known and the one they saw die. And there’s physicality: body, hands, feet, and apparently an appetite. Got anything to eat? He took and ate in their presence. Want to hear a story? And he told how the scriptures are fulfilled by his death and resurrection. All of this is critically important to their experience and to ours. From there, they would, as he said, be witnesses of the power of the resurrection for all the world.

Witness to the gospel and the resurrection would from then on emphasize the importance of bodily resurrection and material presence. Christianity is a *with* way of life---a *with* religion. In community we are *with* one another in joy and sorrow and times of need; in the breaking of bread and washing of feet, we are *with* one another in partaking of the supper of our Lord and following his model of humility. In missions and service, we are *with* others in vulnerability and need. There’s a “with-ness” that’s integral to this way of life.

There is a marvelous story Ron Rolheiser tells about a four-year-old child who awoke one night frightened, convinced that in the darkness around her, there were all kinds of ghosts and monsters. Alone, she ran to her parents' bedroom. Her mother calmed her down and, taking her by the hand, led her back to her own room, where she put on a light and tucked her back in. She reassured the child, “You needn't be afraid, you are not alone here. God is in the room with you.” The child replied, “I know that God is here, but I need someone in this room who has some skin!”

This week, I had the honor of being with CBF missionaries who for 20 years have lived and ministered with Afghan refugees in San Francisco, starting just after 9/11. They said it took 5 years to gain the trust of the community just to be asked to teach English classes. 20

years later, they have helped begin an Afghan church. There are now a hundred in the congregation, and more are baptized into Christ each year. Their services are streamed online where hundreds of thousands across the world watch, from places they are not supposed to watch or hear Christian proclamations, they're hearing it and watching it, including inside Iran. They have a life of being *with*, and it makes all the difference.

Presence matters. Skin and bones matter. Jesus came and stood among them. "It is me," he said. There are a number of stories like this of the resurrected Jesus—standing with and among his people in their moment of fear, terror, amazement, joy, confusion, loneliness, and shame, doubt, and despair. Amongst us, this is church life at its best, fulfilling its intention. It's the intention of the project we're taking on now. It's continuing the intention of every project we've done here for over 20 years. In a way, the built environment of the church's grounds is something like skin and bones of the spirit of the congregation across its generations.

There's a cost to this of course for each of us and a temptation to think that Christianity can be lived without it. Amongst the stories of wisdom from the desert fathers, it was said of Abba John, that one day he said to his elder brother, "I should like to be free of all care, like the angels, who do not work, but ceaselessly offer worship to God." So he took off his cloak and went away into the desert. After a week, he came back to his brother. When he knocked on the door, he heard his brother say, "Who are you?" He said, "I am John, your brother." But from inside, he replied, "John has become an angel, and henceforth he is no longer among men." Then the other begged him and said, "No, it's me." His brother did not let him in but left him there in distress until morning. Then, opening the door, he said to him, "Remember, you are a man, and you must once again work in order to eat." Then John made a prostration before him, saying, "Forgive me." It must be stories like this one that inspired the old monastic dual emphasis of *ora et labora*: work and prayer.

Sometimes this work of work and prayer is for institutions and causes that seem huge and intractable. Other times, it's work for an individual or a family and their well-being. Some of the very best, most lifegiving is that which is shared in a community, that is both bigger than any one individual and small enough to be shared with people you love and small enough to make a real difference in your participation in it.

Our shared prayerful work is to embody the gospel in our daily lives and together as a congregation. We don't fly off to become angels. We share life together—real life, in these days taking the shape of our new project. We share places to be *with*—be with children and youth and adults. In the resurrection, Jesus emphasizes the importance of teaching the scriptures—and that will happen. And he emphasizes the witness of eating with one another--and that will happen, too. And in other stories, there is an emphasis on the gospel having flesh and bones and wounds. Almost everything about church life is present in today's reading: touch, a meal, words of invitation, teaching scripture, suffering and rising, confession and forgiveness, proclamation of the gospel, witness and evangelism, and changed lives, hearts, and minds.

And all of that will happen. We just always need someone who has some skin to be with us while we live it. And some flesh and bones, and some wounds, too. There's always a cost for having skin in this world, but there is no other way. It's a cost we gladly bear, taking up our cross and losing ourselves and finding ourselves.

It's a cost we bear to share the joy of taking part in the church's incarnational, resurrectional life in the world—a people, a place, and a purpose to be the body of Christ. In this Easter season, may we be renewed in all the ways our lives receive and take part in this great gift of sharing this life together. Sharing the life of Christ together, that we may have the grace of such an experience with him, standing with us, the grace of hearing his words, "I am with you, always, to the end of the age. I am with you even now. It is me."

Amen.

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