

## "Terror and Peace"

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*<sup>36</sup>While [the disciples] were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." <sup>37</sup>They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. <sup>38</sup>He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? <sup>39</sup>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." <sup>40</sup>And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. <sup>41</sup>While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" <sup>42</sup>They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup>and he took it and ate in their presence. <sup>44</sup>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." <sup>45</sup>Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup>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, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:36-48)*

This morning we pick up again the story of Easter day as told by the evangelist Luke. Cleopas and his unnamed friend had been making a sad and defeated walk to Emmaus, grieving that the hope they had put in Jesus was dead, when Jesus appeared to them on the road. Although they had not recognized him at first, they had walked with this stranger for a while. Along the way he opened the mysteries of the scriptures to them. And that evening, in the breaking of the bread over supper as the sun set on the first Easter, their eyes were finally opened and they recognized Jesus. In that moment he had vanished from their sight. Cleopas and his friend immediately got up from the table and went back to Jerusalem, to seek out the eleven remaining disciples and the rest of Jesus' followers to tell them about "all that had happened on the road" and how Jesus "had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

While this confused group was talking and trying to sort it all out, Jesus appears to them again. This time there is no problem with recognition. They all know it is Jesus, or at least he looks like Jesus. But they still do not understand what is happening, and their initial response is a familiar one for us humans, when we confront something we do not understand: terror. The disciples are startled and frightened, and they experience this terror on at least three levels.

At the outset, they are terrified because they think that a ghost is standing in their midst. They had watched Jesus die. They saw his body laid in the tomb. In their experience, dead things do not walk around or talk. But they had heard stories, the same kind of stories that we still tell around campfires and pay good money to see in movie theaters. When I was practicing law in Wilmington, my office building was an antebellum house built in the 1840's. One night I was working late and I was the only one there. As I was typing on my computer, my dictation machine suddenly turned on. I hadn't touched it. I shrugged and turned it off. A few seconds later, it turned on again. Nothing was wrong with the electricity, because my computer was plugged into the same power strip. I turned it off



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again. And it came on again. I decided it was time to call it a night. Because I had heard the stories about that house, stories of ghosts and other strange occurrences. I wasn't sure I bought them, but better safe than sorry. So I hustled out and locked up, with the hair standing up on the back of my neck.

Jesus can see that his disciples are having this kind of reaction. They are fearful, doubtful, confused about how he could be there. Responding with compassion and understanding, he shows them that he is not a ghost. He tells them to touch him, because everyone knows that ghosts do not have flesh and bones. And then he asks them for some food. It seems an odd detail, does it not, that they would give him a piece of broiled fish? My feeling is that this reflects a powerful memory that the disciples handed down — the fact that they were able to remember not just that he ate something with them, but exactly what it was that he ate. And everyone knows that ghosts do not eat.

Once they realize that Jesus is not a ghost, their terror does not go away. It just moves to another level. Now they begin to feel the same kind of terror that some of them felt on that day when they were in a small boat on the Sea of Galilee, and a fast-moving storm threatened to capsize and kill them, that day when Jesus, who had been sleeping through all of it, spoke just a word, whereupon the water instantly became calm, and the skies instantly clear, and the disciples wondered in fear "*Who is this? Who is this man who can rule the sea, who commands the winds with just one word?*"

I saw a video recently of a little boy who went to the zoo with his parents. He was having a great time, looking at all the exotic animals. And he was especially enamored with the lion. This majestic beast, with full mane, was pacing around near the back of the enclosure, and the little boy would giggle and wave, and then look back at his parents. You can hear their happy voices behind the camera, asking the boy what he thinks of the lion. And then all of the sudden, the lion turns and goes into a full sprint right toward the little boy. He must have looked like pretty easy and tasty prey, a perfect little morsel for a mid-morning snack. The lion comes crashing into the glass that separated his enclosure from the viewing area, his mighty mouth open right near the little boy's head. As the little boy turns and runs toward his parents, there is no joy on his face anymore. He is crying and running for safety, terrified of this beast that had turned on him so angrily. From afar, the lion had been beautiful and fun to watch. But up close, the fangs, the claws, and the sheer power made for a truly terrifying sight.

When the body of Jesus appeared to the disciples, there must have been a feeling that any glass that had separated them from Jesus — any mental, emotional, or rational barrier that they might have erected in their minds — had been removed. They were now standing in the presence of someone whose power does not just surpass that of the winds or the seas, but even the most insurmountable of human obstacles: death. And, as King James would have said, they were sore afraid.

This realization took them to a third and previously uncharted level of terror. One of my professors at Columbia Theological Seminary, Jake Myers, described this kind of terror like this. If Jesus is alive, he wrote, if Jesus really has come back from the dead and is now standing fully resurrected in the disciples' living room, then that must mean "that what he said was true." "If he was not bluffing about his resurrection," Myers continues, then "we need to assume that Jesus really meant what he said about how his followers are to treat

others, especially the marginalized.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, in the dawning truth of Christ’s resurrection, we might really have to embrace all of those crazy things he taught about turning the other cheek, about loving our enemies, about finding our lives not by defending them with force, but by losing them in love.

For disciples, this is one of the consequences of the glass being removed, one of the inheritances that we received when Jesus burst forth from the enclosure of his tomb to confront the world as the true “Lion of Judah.” It means the end of what we might call “plausible deniability.” That term, made popular by the CIA in the sixties, refers to the withholding of information from senior government officials to insulate and protect them from repercussions in the event that illegal or unpopular covert activities ever became public. The roots of the term actually go back even farther, to a National Security Council paper written in 1948 for the Truman Administration, which talked about planning and conducting covert operations in ways that, if uncovered, the US Government could “plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them.”<sup>2</sup>

In essence, the resurrection ends any ability that a disciple might say, “Well, Jesus was a good teacher and a good man, but he really didn’t know what he was talking about on some things.” We can no longer, in good faith, pick and choose which parts of Jesus and his teaching that we like, and which we do not care for. We either have to stand up and face the Lion, accepting that following him might just be a dangerous proposition, or walk away and follow other creeds and philosophies. When the Messiah stood in their midst, when they held his hands and saw his feet, the first disciples were faced with a choice: will I choose to be a true witness to what the Anointed One has said and done? You and I know very well that a decision like that comes with its own kind of terror.

Fortunately for us, this spiritual coin has two sides, and we see them both in this one passage from Luke. Yes, when the risen Christ comes into the room, his power can strike terror into the heart of any disciple. But the Lion of Judah, the one who reigns with strength and majesty, chooses to come to us as the Lamb of God. Gentle and full of grace, he greets us with a message of peace. “Why are you frightened,” he says. “Why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; it is me.” No doubt, many of the disciples would have remembered the promise Jesus had made to them on the last night they were together, before their Lord had been betrayed into the hands of sinners, before he had been humiliated at the hands of the government and the church, before he had suffered death. It was the promise that he would never leave them orphaned. “I will live,” Jesus had said, and “because I live, you also will live.”<sup>3</sup> In their terror, in our terror, the resurrected Christ stands before every would-be disciple saying, “*Peace be with you. Look at my hands and feet. It is me. It really is me. I know you are frightened, but my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. Follow me... be a witness for me... and I will be with you always.*”

The Lion never stops being the Lion, but he chooses to stand with us, and abide with us, as the Lamb.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Myers, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2321](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2321)

<sup>2</sup> “Plausible Deniability,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plausible\\_deniability](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plausible_deniability), accessed April 13, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> John 14:18-19.