

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

April 14, 2024 (3rd Sunday of Easter, Year B)
Luke 24:36b-48

One day a teacher was asking the kids in her fourth-grade class to name the person whom they considered the greatest human being alive in the world today. The responses were quick and quite varied.

A little boy spoke up and said, "I think it's LeBron James. He's the greatest basketball player in the world, ever" A little girl said, "I think it's the Pope because he cares for people and doesn't get paid for it at all." Another little girl said, "I think it's the President because he's the President of the United States and this is the greatest country in the world." Over and over again, kids cited one celebrity after another after another.

But then it was little Donnie's turn. And without even hesitating, when the teacher asked him the question, he replied, "Well, I think it's Jesus because he loves everybody, and he's always ready to help them."

Mrs. Thompson smiled and said, "Well, I like your answer Donnie, because I'm a Christian too. But there's one thing that's wrong. I said the greatest LIVING person, and of course Jesus lived and died two thousand years ago. Do you have any other name in mind?"

I love the simple, innocent, response of little Donnie. He said, "Oh no, Mrs. Thompson, that's not right at all. Jesus IS alive! He's living in me right now!"

Well, he nailed it! That's the greatest assertion of the Church. It's not that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. It's not that he performed incredible miracles, or that he was a profound teacher, or that he embodied the very presence of God, although all those things are true. No, the greatest assertion is that Jesus Christ is alive, and that he lives inside the hearts and souls of each and every one of us here!"

That's the message of Easter. We are in the season of Easter. Two weeks ago was the wonderful celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and during these seven weeks of the Easter season we explore what it means to be "Easter people" – people who claim the promise of life in Christ, now and forever.

In our Gospel text for today we hear the words of Jesus, as he first appeared to the disciples after his resurrection. It's a fascinating encounter. Jesus is suddenly standing there. He just appears, materializes out of thin air, and says, "Peace be with you." And Luke tells us the disciples looked at Jesus like they were seeing a ghost.

Well, how could you blame them? Imagine what it must have been like for them, huddled in that room, consoling each other about the tragic death of Jesus, crushing all their hopes. Sure, they'd just HEARD that Jesus was alive, but I can't imagine that any of them really comprehended or believed it.

So what does Jesus DO with the scared and nervous disciples in that room? And, by implication, what does Jesus do for US when WE are frightened or unsure? Jesus comforts them. His first words to them, and to us, were "Peace be with you." And then he opens their hearts to understand. And then he says, "Do you have anything to eat?"

That's wonderful! Jesus is reassuring them, touching them and sitting down to eat with them — whatever it takes to get them to relax, to accept his presence, and to overcome their fears. Jesus does the SAME for you and me.

I'm struck by the reaction of the disciples. It says, "In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." That's an interesting expression, isn't it — disbelieving joy. The two words don't really seem to GO together, but I can think of a time when I FELT that.

It was when my son Samuel was born. The whole thing was so overwhelming. We were scared. Every once in awhile, when Wendy had a contraction, Sam's heart rate in the womb would plummet. We didn't know what was happening. As the labor progressed, it happened more frequently and got more severe. Something was wrong and we were starting to get worried. I stepped out of the room for a couple minutes and suddenly Wendy's mom is running down the hall, saying, "They're taking Wendy into surgery. You gotta get back in there." When I got there, the room was filled with people rushing around. Wendy said it had happened again, and they decided to do an emergency C-section. And just like that, they took her out of the room.

The Operating Room was right next door, and I could watch through a window in the door at the side. All I could see of Wendy was her head, and she was looking at me with these big scared eyes, but there wasn't anything I could do to make it better. I tried to be strong for her, but I was a wreck too.

Suddenly, a nurse brought the baby into the room where I was to clean him up and measure and weigh him and all that. It was overwhelming. I was in shock. I wasn't ready. What was I supposed to do with all this? I was in disbelief.

Then the nurse told me to give him my hand. And when I did, he reached up and grabbed my finger. I didn't even know that babies did that, but it was the most wonderful thing I've ever experienced. It was joyful disbelief.

Then the nurse wrapped Sam up and thrust him into my arms and said, "Here!" And I thought, "What am I supposed to do with THIS?" Disbelieving joy.

As I remember the whole thing, I can almost hear the words of our savior: "Be not afraid," "Peace be with you." And in that moment, holding my little baby, God GAVE me that peace.

Throughout our lives, there are so many times when we are unsure, when we doubt, when we are afraid, when we don't know what to do — and, just as he did over and over with his followers, Jesus comes to us with the same deeply reassuring words, "Be not afraid," "Peace be with you."

But that message isn't just for US, for you and me. Jesus reminds the disciples that they are his WITNESSES. He'd explained that to them again and again as they were teaching and preaching, and now he's telling them one MORE time — with the added power of his RESURRECTION behind it. Jesus says to them, "You are my messengers. You are the witnesses. You are the ones I'm ENTRUSTING with the Good News of salvation."

Jesus says the same thing to US. Our Lord comes to us, reassures us, lives with and in us, reminds us of all he has taught us — and then he ENTRUSTS us to SPREAD his saving message of Good News.

And, in a strange way, ALL of these things were wrapped up in Jesus' FIRST words to the disciples, "Peace be with you."

Peace is one of those amazing words that seems so simple, but holds incredible depth and power. In the Bible, the word "peace" is much more than just the absence of conflict or a state of serenity; "peace" is a poignant and powerful word. When JESUS says "Peace be with you," he's speaking of a "peace" that comes from a RELATIONSHIP with GOD. When JESUS says "Peace be with you," he means the "peace" that MAKES peace with our neighbor. When JESUS says "Peace be with you," he means a "peace" that is OFFERED by God, and GIVEN POWER by God, a peace that can SHAPE our LIVES — with a depth of love and purpose beyond imagining.

I pray that you and I may KNOW TODAY this "peace that passes all understanding." May Jesus live in us. And may we hear and receive this blessing from Jesus, who stands with us here today, as he did so long ago with the first disciples, and reassures us, and shares a MEAL with us, HIS meal, and says to you and to me, "Be not afraid," "Peace be with you." Amen.