

“Easter Attitude”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
April 30, 2006
Scripture: Luke 24:36b – 48

Two days after Easter, one of our faithful office volunteers asked if we should take down our bright Easter banner out front on Cedar Avenue. He was basically offering a gentle reminder to us, I think, correctly assuming that the church staff was pretty exhausted by Easter preparations and just getting back in the swing of things. He just wanted to make sure we knew that Easter was over. The banner can come down now, Rod was saying in his gentle way. In a sense, he was right. Even the heartiest of the Easter lilies and tulips in the church have been put out to pasture.

But you might have noticed as you walked from the parking ramp into church today that our Easter banner is still up. The calendar of church seasons I keep in my desk reminds me that Easter doesn't end after the brass postlude on Easter morning, but actually is a season that extends all the way until Pentecost. We won't keep our Easter sign up that whole time, but we kept it up for a few weeks to remind us that Easter lasts more than one day. Throughout this season we focus on stories from the Bible that tell of resurrection appearances and new life. And in these Bible stories, three themes keep emerging – the intermingling of doubt and belief; Jesus's words of peace; and the promise of new beginnings.

This is our third Easter story, from a third gospel. And as in our stories from the last two weeks, it is clear that faith and doubt go hand in hand for those first disciples. The disciples, Luke tells us, were standing around – mulling over the news of Jesus's resurrection. And suddenly Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

I love this story. Here are the disciples, the ones who had walked with Jesus, watched him do miracles of healing and feeding, who had heard his teaching with their own ears – here are his closest friends and companions standing around talking about the news of his being raised from the dead – and suddenly he is standing among them. Of all people, we might think that they would be expecting him. But Luke tells us that they were “startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.”

Last week I spoke on the topic of a healthy skepticism - that doubt is not the opposite of faith but an important element of being faithful. Last week we heard the story of so-called Doubting Thomas, who was out of the room the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples, and in a famous line, he said “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” But then Jesus did appear again, and Thomas believed immediately and the gospel says nothing about him actually proving it was Jesus by sticking his fingers and hands in the wounds. For Thomas, doubt disappeared, but in today's story, doubt lingers.

They thought he was a ghost. So Jesus begins to talk with them. “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.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

You would think that would be enough. I mean, they knew him best and had worked alongside him for a few years. And now here he is again, talking with them and showing them his hands and feet. That is a heck of a lot more than what we 21st century Christians get as proof of the resurrection. You might think that would be enough for them. But no.

Luke says, they were still disbelieving and wondering even after seeing his hands and feet. They were disbelieving and wondering, so Jesus asks if they have anything to eat. And right in their presence, he ate the piece of broiled fish that they offered him. As closely as we might read the rest of the gospel, nothing indicates that they ever stopped wondering about this. Those among us who wonder about the resurrection, those who think it is almost too good to be true, those who cannot stop asking questions about what really happened early in the dawning hours that first Easter morning – those of us who wonder are in good company. Doubt runs in the family for disciples. Doubt is not a disqualifier for being a disciple – it wasn’t back then and it isn’t now. I find that reassuring! For those one the edge of faith, remember that doubt and wonder are as much a part of the Easter story as joy.

A second consistent theme in these appearance stories occurs in Jesus’s opening lines. Last week, from the gospel of John, “peace be with you.” This week, different gospel, different story, but the same words, “peace be with you.” After Easter, cutting through their amazement and fear and even doubt, Jesus comes with words of peace. I think this is important for us to remember.

Jesus could have said other words. Here he was, back from the dead, after being betrayed and tortured. He could have said other words. In the movie *The Princess Bride* – one of my favorites, one character says the same thing over and over every time he makes an appearance. “Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father: prepare to die.” Jesus could certainly have said something along those lines. “Hello, my name is Jesus of Nazareth. You killed me Friday, now prepare to die.” He could have said that, but he did not. Instead, “peace be with you.” Jesus could have risen from the dead speaking like General George Patton who said, “may God have mercy upon my enemies, because I won’t.”¹ He could have said that, but he did not. Instead, “peace be with you.” He could have spoken like Arnold and said, “I told you, ‘I’ll be back.’” He could have said that, but he did not. Instead, Jesus said, “peace be with you.”

That greeting, “peace be with you” tells us volumes about what Jesus meant and how we should live. The good news of the resurrection is not to be used as a battering ram of truth, nor as a wedge to divide true believers from doubters. The good news is peaceful news. News of peace, news about peace, news offering peace. “Peace be with you.” God’s peace, God’s shalom that is stronger than hate, stronger than violence, stronger than death – God’s peace is what Jesus offered, during his ministry and after his resurrection.

And with that offer of peace comes new beginnings. If Easter means anything at all to us it means that new beginnings are possible. The powers that be that embody the pain and suffering and evil of Good Friday do not have the last word. Instead, love, hope, and peace of Easter offer new beginnings – new possibilities, new starting points.

And new beginnings are hard for us to imagine. It seems like it is human nature to prefer old patterns and old ways even when we know that they are not healthy patterns or healthy ways. We fear the unknown so much that it is easier to go back into old ways. People in twelve step programs know that new beginnings are fearful and foreign, so a community of supporters is needed to provide encouragement and resolve. Those who have endured a divorce or breakup know that it is easy to wish yourself back into old ways of living where what you knew is more comfortable than the fear of the unknown. One reason why so many diets fail is because we are not good at new beginnings!

The first disciples shared this fear of the new. Last week we heard in John's gospel that after hearing the news of the resurrection, the disciples went and locked themselves in a room out of fear. Old fears kept them from sharing the Easter news. Old fears block the Easter message. John's gospel goes on to tell us that the disciples went back to their old jobs as fishermen. Jesus, in that memorable line, had called these fishermen to become, in the non-inclusive words, fishers of men, heard the Easter story and went back to being fishermen.

Easter is not a day, but an attitude. I think the reason the church calendar maintains an Easter season is that it takes more than one day to start living with new beginnings. We need to keep telling the Easter story until we get it right. We need to keep telling the Easter story, not until we believe, but until we start afresh. Jesus needs to reappear, not just once, but over and over in our hearts and imaginations until we hear those words, "Peace be with you" and realize that they are intended for us.

In a world full of too many Good Fridays, we need all the help we can get in living with an attitude of Easter. And there is power in having an Easter attitude. Let me share an Easter story with you.

A visiting schoolteacher who worked in a hospital tutoring children was asked by the classroom teacher of a little boy to go and visit him in the hospital and help him with his homework. The classroom teacher said to the visiting teacher, "We are studying nouns and adverbs in this young man's class, and I hope you will help him."

When the visiting teacher arrived at the hospital, she was dismayed to discover that the child was in the hospital's burn unit in very serious condition and experiencing great pain. She was embarrassed when she walked in the room and saw him in his state of misery, but she decided to press on and stumbled through the lesson, ashamed of herself for putting him through such a senseless exercise. The next morning, the nurse on the burn unit said to the teacher, "What did you do to that boy yesterday?" Before the teacher could get out her apology, the nurse said, "We had given up on him, but ever since you visited him, he seems to be fighting back, responding to treatment."

The boy himself later explained that he had given up hope, but it all changed when he had come to the simple realization that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?²

Do whatever you need to do. Let the Easter banner hang a little longer. Keep watering the lilies and humming Christ is Risen. No clock or calendar can proclaim the end of Easter. Because Easter is an attitude. May it be so.

¹ Quote is from www.military-quotes.com/Patton.htm

² Joanna Adams told this story in her sermon, "Good News Indeed," preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, April 20, 2003, www.fourthchurch.org/%202003/042003sermon.html. She attributes the story to Joyce Hollyday, *Sojourners*, March 1986, p. 19.