

The Same, But Different

TEXT: Luke 24:13-35; Acts 4:32-35

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 16, 2023

If you've been part of a church for some years, you've likely heard the story Cathy just read from Luke's gospel. It is Easter afternoon. Two of Jesus' unnamed disciples, who were in the room for the story told by the women Easter morning, are traveling the seven miles from Jerusalem to the town of Emmaus. When Peter heard the news from the women, he ran to the tomb. These two apparently decided that women were just too emotional, dismissed the news, and left town.

Along the way, Jesus joins them on the road. And here's the interesting part. They have no clue who it is. They travel and have conversation for seven miles—conversation specifically about the Scriptures, about all the events surrounding Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, even including the part about the crazy women who had told them earlier that same morning he was still alive.

According to the account, Jesus is even explaining how what the women said was all predicted by the prophets and basically calls the disciples he's walking with unbelieving fools. But these two men, walking right beside Jesus, talking WITH Jesus ABOUT Jesus and what has just happened to him, go the entire distance and still don't have any idea that Jesus is their traveling companion. They don't recognize him until it's time for dinner and Jesus blesses the bread.

Jesus was not wearing a ski mask. He wasn't in a disguise that he suddenly ripped off at dinner yelling, "Surprise!" But something was different about Jesus' form, and they didn't recognize him; nor did they believe what he was teaching them on the road, until it came time to perform the ritual act of breaking and blessing the bread before a meal.

What's more, they aren't the only ones to get confused. Remember how the Gospel of John tells the resurrection story? In that account it's just Mary Magdalene who goes to the tomb, discovers it's empty, and ends up weeping in a nearby garden because she thinks someone has stolen Jesus' body.

There are no angels to answer to her many questions in John's Gospel. It's Jesus himself who shows up to talk to Mary and asks why she's crying. And guess what? She thinks he's the gardener. She doesn't recognize him either! It's only when he says her name, that she recognizes him.

The post-resurrection Jesus is both the same and different from the Jesus who died and was laid in the tomb. Jesus, after his resurrection, looks different than the man they knew before—different enough that they don't recognize him. Mark's gospel references this Emmaus trip in chapter 16 verse 12 by saying that Jesus appeared "in a different form."

And yet, not everything has changed. Both with the men in Emmaus and with Mary there is a moment when Jesus says or does something that is so familiar that they recognize him. It's different in each case. Jesus speaks to Mary and she doesn't get it. It's only when he says her name. The men travel and speak *with* Jesus *about* Jesus, but for them it's watching him conduct a common ritual that opens their eyes.

The fact that, after his resurrection, Jesus is both the same and different is the Gospel message that I want to bring to you this morning, because I think it gives us an important anchor in times of disruptive change. For starters, there are the world-shaking disruptions of a pandemic, climate upheaval, and political unrest. But well before all that, the church was changing. And, like so much else, the church is now past the tipping point.

Since my arrival at Crawford, in August of 2020, I have tried to change the way we talk about church in these days of intense disruption. If you have said to me, "I just want us to get back to normal," I have countered with the unwelcome news that there is no going back. The ship called "normal" has sailed.

Not only are we not going back to what was in the heyday of the American church in the 1950's and 60's; we're not going back to the way it was in 2019. Not because I'm stubborn and obstinate, I prefer the

word “persistent,” but because the world has changed and continues to change, quickly and in fundamental and irreversible ways.

We don’t have to like it, any more than we like the fact that our health has declined or our marriage has ended or a loved one is gone or we have lost our job. But I have some good news to go along with the bad. Those tombs, including the tomb of the church are empty.

There has been real and painful death. They weren’t fake graves. The forms we so loved are gone and we are right to grieve those losses. But Jesus is risen and has gone ahead of us to Galilee. He is on the road walking with us right now. But resurrection comes in another form; and we don’t always recognize it right away.

What the changed form of Jesus in these stories teaches us is that resurrection is different than resuscitation. To experience resurrection is not to be returned to what we were. When we are resurrected, we’re the same, but different.

What is church? How do we recognize a church home? How do we see Jesus when all the major reporting and much of the evidence says he is dead and gone? Is Jesus in our midst unrecognized? Do we actually want a resurrected church? Or do we prefer to pour all our efforts into trying to resuscitate what was?

One of the many great light-bulb jokes asks how many Christians it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is, “What do you mean *change*?” Whether we’re talking about a literal or a metaphorical resurrection; whether we’re talking about individuals, churches, or societies; the unsettling but ultimately hopeful truth is that death and resurrection are two sides of the same coin.

At the center of Jesus’ message is the cross, teaching us in the most graphic way possible that we have to let go of what was in order to make way for what will be. Jesus came to an oppressed people in a time of political and social upheaval which has many similarities to our own day.

And his message he brought to them and to us is, “If you want something better, if you want liberty *and* justice, if you want the lion and the lamb to be at peace; you can’t just resuscitate what was. All that has to die. Your religion, your society, your interactions with each other will all need to bury the old ways that got everyone into this violent, corrupt mess and take on a new form. You need death and resurrection.

If we want life and peace that has a chance to be truly everlasting, the old way has to be gently but firmly laid in the tomb. The new will be amazing, powerful, and life-giving; but it will not look like the old. We might not even recognize it at first.

Our instinct will be to go back to whatever we considered the “glory days.” But the glory of what was is different than the glory that will be. Seed, meet flower. Acorn, meet oak. If we never allow the seeds to be broken and buried, we will never live in a garden.

If you’ve ever been to therapy, that concept is the key that unlocks healing in a huge number of cases. We have tried to move into something new—a new relationship, a new stage of life, a new way of being in the world—either individually or corporately—without laying the old way to rest. In time, we find ourselves walking the earth like Old Marley in *A Christmas Carol*, caught between two worlds and barely able to move because of the ponderous chain of the past.

Laying beloved things to rest is not at all easy, and we should be gentle with ourselves and with others in those times. But if we want actual resurrection, ultimately, we have to recognize what has already died and let it go. There is no Easter without Good Friday; it’s a psychological as well as a spiritual truth.

If we don’t acknowledge the death, it won’t stop resurrection. No human can stop resurrection. But it will stop resurrection *for us*. It will keep us stuck in cycles of pain and misery, resentful of the people all around us talking about new life and empty tombs. The resurrected Jesus can be right beside us and we won’t have a clue.

If we can hear the truth of the empty tomb; if we can accept that new life springs from that death we are grieving, even death on a cross; we might pay more attention. To bring that back around to the life of the church, even as we grieve the church we have lost, one day we might hear our name in a familiar hymn. We might recognize our people in the rituals that have bound us day to day, week to week, year to year. We'll soon feel the hand on our shoulder and recognize the old voice in a new face. We will break bread together; with a token in worship, in full communion at coffee hour.

That's what happened to the disciples. The passage Cathy read from Acts shows that, once Jesus was gone, his disciples simply lived a communal life together. Jesus was risen, yes. But he didn't stick around to go back to normal. He ascended and left them to their own resurrection. What made them "church" after Jesus was gone was not a particular building or place, but a particular way of being in the world: they shared all they had with each other so that no one was in need.

As the old song says, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." Not by our sanctuary space, not even by our liturgy and prayers. The first Christians recognized each other and were identified to the world by the radical ways that they cared for each other and those in need. That "way" became church.

They didn't always recognize each other on the street, but when they saw the actions, heard the blessings, experienced the love, their eyes were opened. "Church" has had thousands of forms since then, but only one true way: The way of unconditional love and service, especially to the poor and marginalized.

Once they truly understood resurrection, once they learned that Jesus could appear in all kinds of forms but still could be recognized through word and deed; a handful of scared disciples, who couldn't even recognize Jesus when he stood next to them, became a force that changed the world. And thus has it ever been.

I bring you the news that the tomb of the church is empty. What once lay there was beautiful and precious and beloved. It is both right and necessary to grieve its passing so that we can keep ourselves from running feeding tubes into an empty grave.

The church is not there. The tomb is empty and the new church is walking and talking among us, even as we, in our blindness, echo the disciples on the Emmaus Road: "Have you not heard? The church is in decline." "We had hoped it would be different; that the church could be a force for good in the world."

To adapt the tagline from our UCC friends, "Jesus is still speaking." We're not in Jerusalem anymore; we're on the road, and Jesus is walking with us, speaking with us and to us. But the form is different and can be hard to recognize.

Like the post-resurrection Jesus in other gospel accounts, walls are no barrier to being at church now. Those on the livestream are here with us. They are church. Time itself is not a barrier; you can now binge an entire month of church in an afternoon on our YouTube channel. If that inspires you to live as Jesus taught, that is also church.

The form is different, but the form is not the church. The *way* of Jesus, as embodied in any and every human soul, is the church. The unconditional love and welcome of all. The life of service. Finding strength in weakness. Sharing with those who have less. Shunning violence and coercion. Healing the sick. Standing for justice. Whenever and wherever you recognize those things, Jesus will appear, plain as day. And that will be church. That will be home.

It might take a few miles before we settle into a new form of things; and, likely well before we feel ready, that new form will change yet again. But, once we learn to recognize the *way* of Jesus and not just the dude in a robe and sandals, we will finally proclaim, like the unnamed disciples in Emmaus, "The Lord is risen indeed!" and see in the mirror our own resurrection. Amen.