

Up, Up, and Away: Superhero Faith for Ordinary Christians

#1 “Resurrection Faith”

Sunday, April 14, 2024

The Third Sunday of Easter

Luke 24:36-49

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Jesus brings peace to the disciples, standing before them as a sign that God’s presence remains with us, even in our fears and doubts.

Terrified, and frightened. They thought they were seeing a ghost—and, here we are, thousands of years later, and we remain terrified and frightened at times. And that is our good news. It is good news because it is in our doubts and fears that we discover the presence of the risen Christ.

And, sometimes, it is in moments of chaos that we are led closer to peace.

I had an interesting question the other day. It came from a little boy who looked at me and said, “Pastor Chris! Pastor Chris! Is Jesus a zombie?” I thought, “Well, I’ve never had that question before.” I looked at him and said, “No, I don’t believe Jesus was a zombie.” But here came the punchline. “But that’s what my mom told me,” he said.”

Wow. Here I was: having to defend the orthodoxy of the faith on the one hand while trying not to discredit the little boy’s mother. “Well,” I said, “I guess I could see how some people might say that, but I don’t believe that Jesus was a zombie.” Later, I realized that I could have said, “How could Jesus be a zombie? Zombies eat brains, and Jesus ate fish!”

Chaos sometimes leads toward peace.

We saw that happen on Monday as millions of people scurried to catch a glimpse of the moon passing in front of the sun. Not only did this create clogged highways in southern Missouri, it also did something no one else has managed to do so far in 2024: it created a moment of unity. For a few brief minutes we stopped talking about what divides us and stood looking up to the sky in amazement and wonder.

It was a moment bursting with possibilities, a moment of peace hovering above a chaotic world.

Our family experienced something similar to that a week ago when our daughter and son in law were married. It was a quiet and simple ceremony, just a circle of family gathered near a lake. The wind blew through us as Cindy and Craig were married. And we stood there, filled with wonder and amazement.

Filled with peace and hope, even as we were surrounded by people going about their typical Saturday routines.

Chaos sometimes leads us toward peace—which is exactly what happens as Luke continues to tell the story of Jesus' resurrection. Moment by moment, the church discovers what it means to experience the presence of Christ.

Our Easter is not over. In the midst of the chaos of our world and of our personal lives, we continue to seek the presence of the Risen Christ. He dwells with us, standing with us even in our fears and disbelief. We call these days the "Great 50 Days of Easter," which to me nearly sounds like the title of a comic book or a graphic novel. These 50 Days are filled with vivid expressions of resurrection hope. We tell stories of Jesus' appearance and hear how the early church moved from fear into peace as they bear witness to Christ.

They move from chaos into peace, almost as if they were superheroes—faster than speeding bullets, more powerful than locomotives, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. We read the stories of the things the early church did and somehow dismiss these events as if they were nothing more than comic book characters. But they were not superheroes born on mysterious planets or infused with galactic powers.

They were, Luke tells us, witnesses. Ordinary women and men, filled with this curious mix of joy and disbelief, fear and doubt. Ordinary people living in a chaotic and often troubled world. People like you and me, just trying to make sense of the strange things they had seen.

People who had lingered in moments of pain, whose spirits had been crushed. People who had walked away from the community—maybe out of fear, maybe out of anxiety, maybe because they just could not understand what had happened. People who were just out for a walk, trying to make sense of how their lives had been turned upside down.

People lingering in pain, surrounded by chaos, whose spirits had been crushed. These are the ones to whom Jesus appears.

Their stories, their ordinary experiences, invite us to consider how Jesus' resurrection shapes us.

Luke's story of Easter is divided into three acts. Act One is the story we hear on Easter Sunday. It is the story of the women being confronted by the empty tomb. Filled with fear, they are met by an angel who tells them, "Do not be afraid!" It's what angels always say. The angels backs up this claim by reminding them what Jesus had told them: "that the Son of man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." And then, Luke says, they remembered.

Act Two takes place on a road leading away from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. Two otherwise unknown disciples are walking together, trying to make sense of what had happened. Jesus appears and walks beside them. They do not recognize him and are surprised that this stranger seems to have no clue about the events of the last three days. You know, he's that person who never watches the news.

The stranger scoffs at their disbelief, chiding them for not understanding the stories of scripture. For the moment, however, these disciples are not at peace. They a frightened, filled with doubts.

But then the stranger turns their chaos into a moment of peace. He reminds them of the stories of scripture. He recites those mighty acts of God—and as he is speaking, their hearts begin to burn with overwhelming peace. When they reach Emmaus, they invite him to stay with them. And then when Jesus takes bread, and blesses it and breaks it, their eyes are opened. They remembered who it was who had been with them.

In response, they high tail it back to Jerusalem, where they find the disciples huddled in a room with the drapes drawn and the doors shut. The others are talking over each other, in a mix of fear and excitement. They tell them, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon."

And as the two begin telling their story, Jesus stands among them and says to them "Peace be with you."

Luke is reminding us that despite what we might think, Easter is not over once brunch is finished and the leftovers are discarded. It is not even over when the last jellybeans have been eaten or when the marshmallow candies grow stale. Easter is not over even as the sun sets on that first day of the week.

In fact, it's just begun.

Now comes the time for the church to be filled with peace, even in our world where death stalks us and fear abides. Now comes the time for the church to claim its role to be witnesses in retelling all it has seen and heard and experienced. We are not called to set aside our doubts and fears. Instead, we are called to remember that it is in the presence of these doubts and fears that Jesus stands with us.

He enters the world of our fears, risen from the dead. He brings us the gift of peace.

Even then the disciples were terrified, thinking they had seen a ghost. But the wounds are still visible on his hands. The scars are still present. He is speaking and breathing, and then, like a hungry teenager who rises out of the tomb of their room, speaks to them and asks, “Got anything to eat?”

They are witnesses not to a ghost or to a specter, but to the embodied Christ. This not a resuscitation, Tom Long notes, or some sort of party trick that suggests while Jesus was “dead as a door nail on Friday,” he’ back in “fine form on Sunday, good as new, polishing off a plate of fish.” No, he is risen in ways that are both old and new, recognizable to those whose eyes were opened, yet forbidding them to cling to him. Instead, those who are witnesses of resurrection are called to remember that Jesus stands with them, breaking apart the chaos and fear.

This is the time for the church to practice resurrection as it lives into the hope that “he has been raised; he is not here.” Sundays are filled with joyful acclamations of Jesus’ resurrection and the gift of new life. The church goes into the world, proclaiming the good news and declaring God’s victory over the powers that threaten to undo us.

Walter Brueggemann once quipped that Easter should be considered a verb. “Eastering” our churches means more than putting up smelly lilies. It’s a time, as Joshua Rice said for all of us to have the bravery to look deep into the Risen Christ’s wounds and shout, “My Lord and My God

Here is where we are challenged: to witness this gift of peace. To share that, and to share in telling the stories of his life. The poet Mary Oliver captures the spirit of resurrection and what it calls us to do. Here are instructions for living a life, she writes:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it. ¹

¹ Mary Oliver, “sometimes,” <https://poetrying.wordpress.com/2012/09/14/sometimes-mary-oliver/>
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May Christ's presence among us startle and surprise us, awakening us to new hope, and calling us to find peace—in our lives, our neighborhoods, in our world. Amen.