

“Joyful Disbelief”
April 26, 2009

Psalm 4
Luke 24:36-48

The disciples were startled and afraid. Even in their joy they were disbelieving. Have you noticed how easy it is to be afraid? Have you noticed that fear and doubt can have great power in our lives? Have you noticed that, even when we have experienced the joy and freedom of encountering the Holy One in our midst, we often retreat quickly back into disbelief and captivity? Have you notice what a mixed bag of courage and fear each of us can be?

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A few days ago, I was drinking my morning tea in our living room, and, for once, our dog Peetah was *not* curled up in my lap while I sat on the couch. Instead, she was exploring one of the piles of Thrift Shop donations they would be fixing or cleaning or sorting later that day. For a few moments, at least, it was a quiet start to the day – peaceful, gentle, kinda slow. Then, suddenly, Peetah leaped up and back. Her tail, which is usually curled so sprightly over her back, was tucked tightly between her legs. And her little face seemed filled with fear.

And what, oh what, had frightened her and turned her peaceful morning into a doggie version of a horror movie? As soon as I looked over at where she’d been sniffing around, I knew the answer. Peetah’s joyful exploration had ended so abruptly and with such fear because a piece of paper had moved. My happy little dog had gone from canine adventurer to cowering pup in an instant, all because a single sheet of 8 _ X 11” paper had moved a few inches.

I confess ... I was tempted to make fun of her, and although I didn’t do that, I did roll my eyes, shake my head, and mutter, “Oh, Peetah.” Even in the midst of my eye-rolling and head-shaking, though, I was mindful of two things. One was that Peetah was a stray, so that she had had early experiences in her life that taught her that the world is *not* a very safe place. And the other thing that was on my mind and in my heart is that, in her great fear of a plain ol’ sheet of paper – in her uncertainty about whether it was OK to relax and not be afraid – Peetah didn’t seem all that different from you and me and the rest of our human brothers and sisters.

Maybe we aren’t afraid of the movement of a single sheet of paper ... although, admit it, haven’t there been times when you’ve been so tense, so stressed out, so on edge, that a single unexpected noise made you jump?

So maybe we are or aren’t afraid of the movement of a single sheet of paper, but we *can* fear the words on a single sheet of paper. We can be afraid of a sheet of paper with the words “IRS audit,” “foreclosure,” “you are being laid off,” “I’m leaving you,” or “the test results weren’t clear, please schedule an appointment as soon as possible.” We can be afraid of sheets of paper or computer screens with the words “Obituaries” and the name of a dear friend listed below. We can be afraid of sheets of paper or computer screens with the words “swine flu,” “global warming,” “gang violence,” “Taliban,” or “nuclear weapons.”

I don't mean to suggest that human fears of death, unemployment, homelessness, abandonment, and violence are equivalent to my dog's fear of a sheet of paper, but I am offering the possibility that we are vulnerable to becoming just as jumpy and just as reactive as she was to even a *hint* of danger or threat. And I'm suggesting that our jumpy reactivity can leave us just as cowed and cowering as Peetah's reactions to a sheet of paper left her one morning last week.

Human fears, of course, go deeper than fears of death, disease, and divorce, in our own lives and in the lives of those we know and love. And as our fears go deeper, we can begin to wonder whether, in fact, death, disease, divorce, and defeat is all there is for anyone. We can start to agree with the bumper sticker that was popular a number of years ago: "Life's a [expletive deleted]. You work hard and then you die."

I wonder if Jesus' disciples, as we encounter them in Luke's story this morning, had started to believe the 1st century Judean version of "Life's a [expletive deleted]. You work hard and then you die." I wonder if their version of the bumper sticker might have been something like, "Life's a nightmare. You work hard, you live with courage, you bring healing, and you live love and teach love ... and then you die, tortured to death on a cross." Yes, they might have thought, Jesus did tell them he was going to suffer and die and yet still live, but what sort of fool, what sort of yahoo, would believe something so ridiculous?

And so I wonder about those disciples.

I wonder if ...

after starting to believe that the kingdom of God – the commonwealth of God – truly was among them ...

after starting to try to live as he had been teaching them to live, by feeding the hungry, loving their enemies, and blessing those who cursed them ...

after coming to believe that life's a *gift* suffused with grace ...

I wonder if, after all that, Jesus' followers had started to sink into the fear that, if life really is a gift, it's a hard, heavy, painful gift at best.

I wonder if Jesus' followers had started to sink back into the fear that the commonwealth of God is nowhere near ... if, in fact, it's anywhere at all.

I wonder if Jesus' followers had started to sink back into the fear that it's pointless to love, to bless, to share, and to serve in a world of so much violence, oppression, and exploitation.

And so I wonder about those disciples, gathered in Jerusalem after the crucifixion and after the discovery of the empty tomb. Were they just as jumpy as my dog was, as they heard from two other followers of Jesus that they had encountered him, risen and alive, on the road to Emmaus?

In Luke's description, they sure *seem* jumpy. They were startled. They were terrified. Jesus calls them "frightened." *And* they were joyful, disbelieving, and wondering – all at the same time. In other words, they sound an awful lot like the human beings I know. And in Luke's description of that day long, long ago and of people who seem mighty familiar, the most striking words for me are these: "while in their joy they were disbelieving."

Joy and disbelief in the same person. Joy and disbelief in the same heart. Joy and disbelief in the very same moment.

Doesn't at least the *disbelief* part of that description apply to you, too, some of the time ... maybe even most of the time? We don't have to look far – we may not even need to look past our own mirrors – to see people who are losing their jobs, their homes, their hopes. The brokenness of alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, greed, and indifference isn't some far off phenomenon; it's brokenness that is here in this church and in this community. So it's easy – and very human – to look around and start to wonder and even to say, "Life's a [expletive deleted]," full of pain, whether it's our own pain or that of our neighbor or the pain of someone we may never know. How can there be joy in that?

So I suspect most of us can join those disciples in Jerusalem long ago in their hesitance to believe that life is holy. We can join them in their hesitance to believe that life is the sacred gift of a loving God who is at work in all times, all places, and all people, seeking to bring healing, justice, and true peace.

If we aren't willing to believe those things, who's to blame us? We don't even need to pick up a newspaper or search the internet to found reasons to doubt – all we have to do is look at the frayed relationships in our own families or our own church and we can see that healing and true peace haven't yet swept through and transformed our lives, much less the life of the planet.

And then in the Easter story, which God offers to make *our* story, in the midst of fear and doubt, God appears. God appears in the form that Christians know as the risen Christ and that other peoples know in different ways. God appears and says to us, *while* we are fearing and doubting, "I am real. Look at me; touch me. Trust me. I am no figment of your imagination." Just as Jesus appeared to his disciples as they struggled to choose between, on the one hand, accepting violence and death as the greatest realities of human life or believing, instead, in the power of love to transform hate, violence, and even death, so God appears to us in countless forms, inviting us, *urging* us, to choose love, live love, and risk love.

And in those moments of divine presence, we can join the disciples of long ago in being simultaneously joyful and disbelieving. We join them in being utterly human, able to open to the joys of grace while still doubting that they are real. We can join them in joyful disbelief.

And the Gospel of Luke puts before us this lovely, astounding possibility: that precisely when we are afraid, joyful, disbelieving, and wondering, God tells us, "I need your help." In this morning's readings, God in the risen Christ asks for something to eat, eats, and then tells Jesus' followers that they are called to be witnesses of the presence of the Holy One in human life, witnesses to the truth that God offers love and an extravagant welcome home to every one.

My beloved brothers and sisters, this Easter season thus offers us the invitation to be honest about our fears and doubts, to receive the Holy One into our midst any way, and then to respond to the Holy One's request for our help by nurturing and sharing that holy presence throughout the world, beginning in this congregation and then spreading into Sonoma and the entire world.

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I'd like to end this morning by asking you, if you're willing, to close your eyes. Take a deep breath ... and then let it out. Then take another deep breath ... and then let it out, too. As you keep breathing slowly, let your mind drift to a time when you were

feeling afraid or filled with doubt about the power of love and grace in your life or in the world. Let your mind take you back to a time in which you, like the disciples, were startled and afraid, and then explore that memory. Look around in it. Do you see anything other than your doubts and fears? Do you see the presence of the Holy One? Do you sense a loving presence that offers you joy in the midst of your fears? Is there something or someone who brings you peace and then asks you to share it with others? Or is there simply something or someone that lets you know that even if the things you fear come to pass, you will never be alone and you will never be anything or anyone less than one of God's beloveds?

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The presence of what Christians know as the Living Christ comes in countless forms, in unexpected ways, and at surprising times. It can come in another human being, in a whisper heard only in our hearts, in the magnificence of a redwood tree, or in the antics of a dog or a cat. The promise of the Gospel is that, whatever the form, the Living Christ is here, sharing our pain and fear, and calling us out of them into the light of joy and love.

Live this day trusting in that promise. Live this day, ready to recognize the presence of Christ in your life and in all life. Live this day, ready to nurture that presence wherever and however you encounter it.

The Holy One is speaking peace to you, to me, and to the whole world. Let us be witnesses of these things.

Amen.

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