

“DISBELIEVING FOR JOY”
Sermon for Easter 3, April 14, 2024
St. John Lutheran Church, Massillon, Ohio

Luke 24:36-49: *36 As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” 37 But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. 38 And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate before them.*

44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

The title of today’s sermon is, “*Disbelieving for Joy.*” It is based on the words of verse 41: “... *and while they [the disciples] still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, Jesus said ...*”, etc.

They disbelieved that Jesus was alive again even though He was standing right in front of them, in flesh and blood.

To “disbelieve” means “to not believe someone or something.” It is the opposite of believe.

So the disciples disbelieved that Jesus was alive in the flesh. Were their eyes deceiving them? Were they all subjects of a mass illusion or delusion?

And even more puzzling, St. Luke says that they “*disbelieved for joy!*” Were they joyful about not believing what their eyes told them, or were they joyful about seeing Jesus again? Now this is really puzzling. What is going on here?

Well, before we consider what exactly happened on that first Easter evening, and what this means for us today, let us ponder this business of “*disbelieving.*”

Last Monday we witnessed a monumental and unique event. We here in Ohio and many other people in our country were able to experience a total solar eclipse. Perhaps you went outside and watched the moon slowly cover the bright sun which brought about increasing darkness in the middle of the afternoon. It was also a nice day here in our section of Ohio. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event!

When the moon started covering the sun, my family members who live in this area kept in touch with each other via texts and photos and videos with our smart phones.

When the darkness slowly appeared, my grandchildren in Hudson and Wadsworth were looking up with their special glasses and saying things like, “*Wow! I don’t believe it! It’s so dark! This is really cool! I’ve never seen anything like this! I can’t believe it!*”

In other words, the grandkids and even we adults were “*disbelieving for joy.*” We could not believe our eyes. It was a unique scene to be in the darkness in the middle of the afternoon, with birds suddenly singing their evening songs, and crickets starting to chirp chirp!

“*Disbelieving for joy!*” None of us thought that this event was unreal and not really happening. It is actually a God-given miracle.

But a part of us was so amazed it was hard to believe even though it was true, and yet we believed it and now have a marvelous memory.

Now, let us go back to Jerusalem in 30 AD on that first Easter and join the disciples in that locked upper room. As dramatic as Jesus’ sudden appearance is, we need to delve into the words of Jesus that followed for the disciples’ and our sake.

Now, just before our text begins, St. Luke records the risen Jesus’ appearance to two disciples along the

road to Emmaus and the meal in their home. They were prevented from recognizing Him earlier, even though one of them, Cleopas, was the brother of Jesus' stepfather Joseph, making him an uncle of Jesus.

But they immediately recognized Jesus when He broke the bread at the dinner table. And the two immediately rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. And the disciples tell them that Simon Peter had already seen Him.

While they are still comparing notes and wondering if all this were really true, Jesus suddenly appears in their midst and says, "*Peace be with you.*"

This is the Easter greeting. It is the joy of resurrection. Death is defeated. The grave cannot hold us. Sin is forgiven. Life is restored. There is peace.

And so, "*Peace be with you.*"

The disciples are startled and afraid and doubting. They think that they are seeing ghosts.

But this is no ghost or illusion. Jesus shows them His hands and His feet, the wounds by which we are healed. They mark Him forever as the Crucified One, the One who laid down His life for the sin of the world.

The wounds also authenticate Him. This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Lamb who was slain but now lives.

Jesus invites them to touch Him. He is touchable. Real. Bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh.

This is why we Christians believe that our bodies will rise from the dead, and why we do not just go on as "*spirits*" or "*souls*," because Jesus rose bodily from the dead.

The tomb of Jesus is empty. The disciples not only saw Jesus, they touched Him. Flesh and bone. "*Disbelieving for joy!*"

Still not convinced? Still uncertain? Dead men do not rise, ordinarily. Jesus takes a piece of broiled fish left over from dinner, and He eats it right there in front of His troubled disciples.

And Jesus does this not because He was hungry. And He was not looking for a snack.

This is more evidence! Ghosts do not eat fish. Or really anything, for that matter. The flesh and blood Jesus is consuming a real piece of fish. Eating is a body thing.

And there is something more going on here. Something a bit "*fishy*," as it were.

Let me explain. Psalm 74 says: "*You [God] crushed the heads of Leviathan; You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.*"

What is "*Leviathan*?" Leviathan was the great "*sea monster*," the dragon of the sea, the devil. The image is that Leviathan was being served up as an appetizer at the messianic banquet!

The disciples also certainly remembered the miracle in the wilderness when Jesus multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish to feed more than 5000 hungry people. I am sure that they were in awe of Jesus' divine power. What a fantastic miracle!

But now, in this moment, Jesus is eating a fish. They knew Jesus had died and was buried, but now, by His eating a fish, they now have proof that Jesus is alive again in body and soul! Continued disbelieving for joy!

And the eating of fish is a sign that the risen Jesus has conquered death and the devil who is now served up as a first course at His banquet!

As St. Paul said in First Corinthians, "*Death is swallowed up in victory.*"

Jesus is painting a wonderful picture for the disciples regarding His resurrection and will soon send them out to witness to His glorious victory. You see, the risen Lord Jesus Christ is validating Moses, the prophets, the writings (Psalms). It is all about Him, about Jesus, about His saving death and triumphant resurrection.

Yes, this truth is foreshadowed in the Old Testament. Before the Name of Jesus was ever known, even before the Son was born in Bethlehem, the entire Old Testament testified to Him.

The Bible is the record of the Mystery dwelling among us, the Word made flesh that made all things in the beginning, the Promise to Abraham that created a nation out of slaves, the Exodus out of Egypt to the Promised Land, the throne of King David, the Suffering Servant, and all the promises of the prophets regarding the coming Messiah.

The words of the Old Testament can be summed up in one message: that the Christ, God's Anointed One, the Promised Messiah, would suffer and die and on the third day rise again.

Centuries – literally thousands of years before it all happened – it was written down and handed on from generation to generation, all pointing to that one very good Friday when Jesus said, "*It is finished.*"

And then Jesus did something remarkable in the midst of His disciples. He opened the disciples' minds.

They were now witnesses of His message and His saving work of death and resurrection.

Are you disbelieving for joy? Does that strike you as strange? There they are, standing there, seeing Him eat fish, they know their Bibles, they have been instructed personally by Jesus for three years, and yet even now, He must open their minds.

What does this tell us? You can know all the facts and still not believe. You can know the Bible by heart and still not trust that it is all for you.

We are born closed-minded. Sin has shut our minds from God. We deceive and delude ourselves. We think we are the gods. We think we are the masters of our own destiny.

In the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, our Small Catechism teaches, *"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him."*

Our reason alone cannot get us there. Our minds are closed to our own salvation. They must be pried open by the Holy Spirit.

Our minds must be opened to understand the Scriptures. This is why we do not simply hand out Bibles and say, *"Have a good read."*

This is why Jesus did not leave us with just a book. He sends Apostles to testify, and pastors to preach, and a Church and her members to be witnesses, and Baptism to administer and a Supper to serve!

The resurrection of Jesus is an historic fact. This is true.

But it is much more than that. It is Gospel, good news. It is a living Word from a living Lord preached into ears that opens closed minds and turns hardened, sinful hearts to the forgiveness of sins. From disbelief to joyous belief.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is anchored in history, but these true events are more than history – they are our life and salvation and our hope of resurrection to eternal life with God.

Think for a second of how you came to believe. Someone told you. Maybe your parents, grandparents, going to Sunday School. Maybe a friend in a conversation, or a neighbor or co-worker. Someone told you.

The disciples told what they had seen and heard, beginning in Jerusalem and then – Asia Minor, North Africa, Europe, India.

Now, in our time, it is our turn to tell others what you and I have been told, bearing witness to Jesus' saving death and resurrection. That's how it works.

There are no *"professional witnesses"* in Christ's Church. No hired experts. Just simple disciples, like you and me – sent into the world to share the light of Christ in the darkness.

Our Gospel text is clear that faith is not based on feelings but on facts. What are the facts?

The cross and the open, empty tomb.

The Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The witness of the Old and New Testaments *"which are able to make people wise to salvation in Christ Jesus."*

The Holy Sacraments, the visible, tangible ways that Jesus reveals Himself to us – the water and Word of Baptism, the Supper of His Body and Blood, the Word of forgiveness.

Jesus said to His disciples: *"I am sending the promise of My Father upon you ..."*

The promise of God the Father is upon you and me too, embedded by the Holy Spirit in our hearts with the new life of Christ animating our existence in this crazy, messed-up world.

Who knows? As we, like the disciples, keep disbelieving for joy, we will remain faithful to the only One who can make a difference in this world and in the lives of others.

There is only one death and resurrection that saves. There is only One with the wounds and the words we can trust. There is only One who has swallowed up death like a broiled fish. There is only One who can bring true hope and peace in this world.

And so we wait for His glorious appearance and the establishment of the new heavens and earth for us when we will be raised from the dead to live with Him eternally.

May we keep *"believing for joy!"*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

– Pastor John L. Telloni