

Jesus Himself Stood Among Them

Easter 3

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Luke 24:36-49

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you've been around very long, you know that if something appears too good to be true, it is. Whenever you watch TV, you are inundated with advertisements. When you read magazines, it is the same. Even if you don't do either of those, billboards are everywhere. And as you wait in line at Walmart or Dollar General, you have several of those supposedly wonderful devices that no one else has ever thought of to fix a problem that you have—and all for a low, low price. Sometimes these devices can work, but usually, if it's too good to be true, it is.

If someone were to tell you about one of these products, you might respond “I'll believe it when I see it.” That's what society has taught for years: that seeing is believing. That's what liberal theology says as well: if we can't see it happen today, it must not have actually happened. If wooden staffs cannot physically become living serpents today, then it must not have happened in the Exodus. If someone cannot survive being in the belly of a great fish today, Jonah must not have actually done it. If virgins cannot give birth today, Mary must not have been able to do it two thousand years ago.

So what of someone coming back from the dead? The premise of this is so unbelievable that that was the plot of the Robert Downey, Jr., Sherlock Holmes film a few years ago. Holmes was called upon because a villain who had been tried and hung had suddenly returned, seemingly from the dead. To Holmes, this was inconceivable.

If someone were to ask a genius like Richard Dawkins if it were possible, he would likely deny it. That's the premise of a Lutheran Satire YouTube video that has been around a while: Hawkins arguing that it's impossible for someone to come back from the dead, to which Donall and Conall, the Lutheran Satire twins of theological wisdom, reply that that's why it was such a big deal when Jesus *did*.

We'll continue to explore these thoughts as we turn to our text from the Gospel reading from Luke twenty-four.

Verse 1

Just prior to our text, Jesus had walked with some of the disciples on their way to Emmaus. He had talked with them about the recent event of His death, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” Then Jesus broke bread with them and disappeared from their sight. “As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, ‘Peace be with you!’ But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 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.’ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling...”

We'll pause there. What was the reaction of the disciples to Jesus appearance? In the first appearance, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him (v.16).” They only recognized Him for who He was when He broke the bread. But what of the second time He appeared to them? “(T)hey were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit.” And even once Jesus had spoken to them, “they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling.” The disciples could not believe what they were seeing—and understandably so. Coming back from the dead is not—and was not—a common occurrence. Yes, Lazarus and the widow's son had been raised, to name a couple, but it still wasn't a frequent event.

But do take note: the disciples saw Jesus Himself standing with them, and yet they did not immediately believe it. Some might think it hard to understand that the Israelites walked through the Red Sea and then returned to sinning. The question they pose is Why? Why didn't seeing cause them to believe? Well, apparently it just doesn't work that way. Isn't that what we also heard from Jesus speaking to Thomas last week? Didn't Jesus say, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"?

Verse 2

"(H)e said to them, 'Have you anything to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them. 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.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures..."

Jesus gives His disciples one final proof that He has risen and is not a spirit by eating before them. Apparently the food did not pass through Him and land on the floor. Instead Jesus kept the food down and then continued to teach the apostles. In speaking His Word to them, Jesus gave them the ability to believe what He had been teaching them all along: that He had had to suffer and be crucified for their sins, and that He had risen again, just as He had said.

Again, it was not seeing Him alive or watching Him eat that finally opened their minds—it was His speaking His Word to them. Even for us, Jesus' death for the forgiveness of our sins—mine and yours—and His resurrection from the dead, sounds too good to be true. We cannot believe it simply by seeing it, even if we had—no—the Spirit works through His Word to create and sustain that faith in us—in me and in you.

That's what Jesus reminded them that He had been teaching them. He "said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'"

Verse 3

Jesus continued, "You are witnesses of these things. 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."

Jesus told the apostles that they were witnesses—despite having just shown them that they did not believe from seeing. They had all seen what had happened in Jesus' life, His ministry of preaching and teaching, healing and raising—yet they had not understood these things when they had seen them. Once He was raised from the dead, Jesus opened the Scriptures to them, showing how they proclaimed His coming and what He would do, twice—once on the road to Emmaus, and again here in our text this morning. While they had seen what had happened, Jesus only here calls them His witnesses because it is only here that they understood the fulfillment of the Scriptures and what it is that they were to teach and proclaim. They were to teach and proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Today, you and I have been called by the Gospel to be witnesses to these things as well. And like with the apostles, it doesn't matter if we have seen Jesus' ministry while He was here or not—what matters is that we have heard and believe the testimony about it. We believe and confess what Jesus has said: firstly, that we are sinners by nature, and that we can do nothing to help ourselves out of that state; and that because of being sinners, we have sinned against God and against one another in real, painful ways. And God opposes the proud. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm

51:17).” So we confess; and when we confess, “God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Then, secondly, we are called to proclaim that glorious good news that Jesus has paid the price for those sins. And because Jesus has paid for our sins, God has declared that He will remember them no more. Jesus has paid the price that we rightly owed, and we are forgiven for His sake—you and me, we, are forgiven for His sake.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.