

## Listening

If you've even taken a course in public speaking, you know about persuasive speech. It's trying to convince someone of your point of view. You marshal all of the positive evidence and minimize the negatives, putting everything in the best possible light.

Persuasive speech is exactly the opposite of all the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. That makes them all the more remarkable. Mark is the strangest; he doesn't even give us an appearance by the risen Christ. Instead, the women find an empty tomb and run away afraid, saying nothing to no one. At least the other three evangelists give us a little more to work with, but even they dwell on fear and disbelief. For me, that's a mark of authenticity. It's the opposite of persuasive speech. Why would the writers do that unless they were really telling the truth?

Another characteristic the Gospel accounts share is that the resurrected Jesus is the same but not the same. He looks enough like Jesus to make him seem to be a ghost to some people. To others he is unrecognizable. Mary Magdalene supposes him to be the gardener. The two disciples walking to Emmaus think he's a stranger who is out of touch with the local news. Peter doesn't know that it is Jesus is on the beach until he catches more fish than he can haul in – and suddenly remembers when that happened before, and who was in the boat with him.

The Collect for today sets us up for these stories. It says that God's "blessed Son made himself known"? Think about that. We do not know Jesus until he makes himself known. Jesus is with us all of the time, and constantly trying to get us to notice him. The initiative comes from him. Our job is to stop and look.

Once we stop and look, God does more. The Collect asks God to "open the eyes of our faith" – not just our *eyes*, but the eyes of our *faith*, as though there is something inside of us that is more receptive to God. In the same way, we're told in today's Gospel reading that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." That worked only when the disciples were ready, after they overcame their fear.

It took a while for the disciples to become receptive. First Jesus gave them that incredible greeting: "Peace be with you." Every time I read those post-resurrection appearances, I stop right there. These people fled when Jesus was arrested. We're told that one of them ran away naked rather than be caught. Peter, the one with the quickest tongue, denied three times that he knew Jesus. Even sturdy Thomas, who had said "let us go with him so that we may die with him," couldn't stay the course. Everyone, *everyone*, had let Jesus down, and the first thing he said when he saw them again was "Peace be with you."

In Luke's story that we heard this morning, Jesus followed this up by addressing their fear. He appealed to their senses. Look, he said. Touch. Feel. It's really me. I'm not a ghost. Still they had their doubts. So he asked for something to eat, to prove that he really did have substance. Only at that point were they ready to have their minds opened. Only then could the eyes of their faith truly see. Only then did they begin to understand all that had been written about Jesus in the scriptures.

And only then was Jesus able to give them their marching orders. Fear, disbelief, and lack of understanding are common to all of the resurrection accounts – and so is a commissioning. Even in Mark, the briefest account, a young man tells the women to take a message to the disciples and Peter. We're told they don't, but that hardly could be the real end of the story. If they hadn't followed through, we wouldn't be here in this cathedral today. Fuller versions of commissioning are in the other Gospels. Luke gives the biggest picture, an ever-widening proclamation, starting in Jerusalem and extending "to all nations." In the Acts of the Apostles, this story reaches to the center of worldly power when Paul reaches Rome.

The story has its power because it intersects with and illuminates all of our stories. We all know what it is like to be afraid and to have doubts. We all have times when we let God down, and let ourselves and others down as well. We all need Jesus to step in and say, "Peace be with you." Jesus says, it's all right. Whatever you have done, Jesus says, I love you and forgive you.

That's not where the story ends, however. It goes on. We are commissioned. We have work to do. This past week in the Epistle I talked about a *Wall Street Journal* article that explored why Christianity was so successful in the years after the resurrection of Jesus. A large part of the reason is that Christians were different. They took care of people, including those who were not Christians. They stood out.

This past Thursday nearly five hundred people attended a talk by Krista Tippett, sponsored in part by Trinity Cathedral. One of the things she talked about was listening – not the kind of listening we usually do, waiting until the other person has finished so we can offer our better story or a rebuttal. Rather, Tippett understands listening as primarily about being present rather than being quiet. A generous listener, she said, wants to hear the humanity in the other person. Another way of saying it is listening into speech.

That kind of listening is the opposite of persuasive speech. It's hearing all of the doubts, fears, and insecurities of the other person without offering advice or trying to solve a problem. It's approaching another and thinking, you are beloved of God. It's expecting to encounter Christ in another. It's the words of Jesus: Peace be with you.

That's our commissioning. We are sent into the world to say Peace be with you. We are to approach people differently than the world does, to seek and serve Christ in everyone. Will we have doubts and fears? Of course. But the whole point of the Gospel resurrection stories is that God will be with us, and God continues to be with us. That's why we say "Alleluia" when we proclaim the risen Christ. So go into the world. Make a difference. Show everyone that being a Christian changes how you live. Be the one to say to someone in fear, "Peace be with you." And then be Jesus to them.

[Easter 3: Luke 24:36b-48.]