

Luke 24:13-49

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost 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. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. 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, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

“Good Faith”

At the Festival of Faith and Writing last week I had the opportunity to hear a number of accomplished writers of faith issues in small group settings and large assemblies. Marilynne Robinson gave one of the keynote lectures titled “Good Faith”. Robinson was awarded the Pulitzer Prize last year for her novel *Gilead*, which chronicles the life of a dying Reverend John Ames through letters he pens to his young son. I read her novel last May for a conference with other young ministers. Reading *Gilead* and the discussions about the novel at the new minister’s conference helped me to discern my call to serve here at Central! John Ames spent a lot of his time in “Not Urgent, but Important” mode as a pastor in a very small, depressed Midwest town. He read and studied and walked around town a good deal of his day. His ministry is a somewhat idealistic vision of pastoral ministry. It seemed sheltered to the group of young ministers who read the novel together; like the life of a cloistered monk or nun. Though his life had become one with his job with little to no separation or boundaries, I was still inspired by his diligence toward his ministry in a collapsing economy. I thought Robinson’s “Good Faith” lecture might be about *Gilead*, but it wasn’t. Instead she unfolded during a challenge to today’s writers to do the hard work of writing with “Good Faith” assumptions toward their readers.

Good faith in Robinson’s use of the term meant that writers and preachers must not cater to popular culture’s demands for fluff. In good faith the author writes to pursue truth and challenges the reader to think critically. In particular Robinson highlighted the hard work of the writer to deconstruct any rhetoric intended to shade the truth for the comfort of the masses in mainline writing, media and politics. Robinson challenged young writers to avoid fluff, pulp fiction, catering to cynicism and cultural whims. Writing in good faith invites the reader to search and yearn with the writer for the something more!

She cited John Calvin, Luther, and many early reformers who broke the mold of their time by writing and speaking in their vernacular to congregations full of commoners and peasants, but did not dumb down their theology or sermons. No, she said, they invited their listeners to join them for a journey to grow in faith together as they delved into the Word together. The modern writer, said Robinson, must assume the reader wants to be challenged and taken on a journey otherwise all is lost.

I brought today's lectionary readings to the conference and had them in the back of my mind during the lecture. Robinson's use of the term "good faith" as a metaphor for a writer's approach to their reader got me thinking about the way the gospel writers share the story of Jesus' resurrection accounts. **Luke and the gospel writers have a unique approach to their writing in respect to their readers.** The gospels don't reflect to their readers the "good faith" principle. They placed good faith, not in the reader, but in God. In relaying the gospel, respect for the reader must highlight what God has done and take seriously our condition of sin. It's not that the gospel writers don't respect their reader, but faith is placed squarely in what God has done, because of lack of right response. The reader does not have the ability to fully follow the gospel's call—ever! The gospel paradox is that the evangelists are quite sure their readers will flub up much in life. When Jesus appears as their living Lord the disciples are not immediately transformed into saints! No—the good news is good—because it comes again and again to all who are in desperate need of it. It comes to those who ponder it and don't quite understand. All of us!

The Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy of the Interfaith Alliance put it this way, "The ancient biblical narratives about the resurrection of Jesus contain a mixture of ecstasy and despondency, an intermingling of delight and discouragement. Just as news of Christ's resurrection caused an explosion of joy among some believers, other believers experienced an erosion of hope. The gospels do not demand that we understand Christ. Rather, they offer the burden-lightening insight that Christ understands us... This one who inspires magnificent visions also ministers amid shattered dreams. This one known as the Prince of Peace does not shy away from chaos and conflict. This one who taught us to pray accepts people who are so troubled that they can't pray. This one who offers salvation identifies with people confounded by feelings of lostness. This one who offers unmatched encouragement knows better than any other the depths of discouragement."

Even after three different resurrection appearance accounts to different disciples, we learn that in our passage the disciples' joy was tempered with disbelief and wonder. "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." To this response Jesus invites, "Touch and see." Luke does not have "good faith" in their ability to grasp all that has happened right away...but he does take his readers seriously and he challenges them in the reality of the lives they lead. The gospels invite us on a lifelong journey! The journey to claim the promise that God loves and forgives sinners. The realization that we can never understand all the mysteries of faith, but that it is enough to have it.

God knows better than we do our need for mercy. God comes again and again to us, throwing caution and good faith principles to the wind, knowing that we often lack understanding and appropriate response. God's disregard for holding one accountable to a good faith principle distinguishes God from us! God invites us on the journey of transformation with the promise of new life each step of the way.

Can we mirror God's way of loving without assurance of a return? Well, we enact God's ways of grace when we baptize infants. We ask the parents questions, and ourselves questions too. Will you raise your child in the faith? Will we as a church commit the time, attention, care and money to support our children and teens' formation in the Christian life? We all say yes. Sometimes we keep our promises, sometimes we don't. There is no guarantee either of us will live out our promises. The underlying trust

is in God! We believe God will always be with the child or adult. We proclaim to the baptized that God will be there for them when both the church family and the family of origin let down our promises.

Jesus lived and died. God raised him. Jesus returned to us as our living Messiah, opening the scriptures to those disciples again and again until it started to click with them. All this work of God took place, because nothing has ever fundamentally changed about humanity and our condition. We need forgiveness, mercy, redemption, wholeness and salvation. God is and always has been willing to accept us and love us without a “good faith” assurance that we will respond appropriately. The promises of God are for us no matter what we’ve done or where we’ve been. We falter, we betray, we lie, we cheat, we turn our backs on God. Yet God reaches out to us like the father did to not only his prodigal son, but also to his irritated older son that was jealous of the father’s love for the wayward child. This is good news! We are witness to it. May our lives be shaped to look more and more like God’s love, which does not rest upon a good faith principle but upon mercy, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation and ultimate redemption. Amen.