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“When It’s Hard to Believe”
Psalm 4 Luke 24:35-48 I John 3:1-7

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 4

Psalm 4 is attributed to King David. It is an appeal for mercy and for the Lord to hear his prayer which asks some very pointed questions and offers a prescription for a good night’s sleep.

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 24:35-49

The Second Sunday of Easter, last week, was our Holy Humor Sunday because the wonder of Easter morning was just so staggering, so hard to believe. Centuries ago, this Sunday became known, in the Latin, as Jubilantae--Jubilant Sunday. The Good News, on this Third Sunday of Easter, is just beginning to sink in. The Good News that the agony and death of Jesus, the darkness of his tomb, the glory of his resurrection--all happened for us. As that message sinks in, our joy and celebration cannot be quelled. Hear the word of the Lord from the gospel of Luke 24:35-48.

Let’s Pray, Lord how slow we are to believe and to trust you. Yet you have entrusted to us the ministry of sharing the good news that you are alive and risen from the dead. It seemed impossible to them until it was revealed to be true. As you have revealed yourself to us, may we in turn reveal you to our world. As we reflect on what it meant to them and what it means to us may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our rock and our redeemer.

On Easter Sunday a friend of mine attended the worship service at the Lutheran Church in Shiner, Texas. She said that the pastor stood up and confessed that she had had a hard week and really hadn’t had time to prepare a sermon. Somberly she said, so this morning we’re just going to sing some Easter hymns and then go home.”

Then, in her head she counted to 3 and jumped up and said, APRIL FOOLS!”

I wish I had thought of that. I would have loved to have seen your reaction.

I don't know about you but I still like to be surprised, to see something happen that wasn't planned- that I didn't think possible. I suppose that's one of the joys of being a Christian. The life of Jesus, his life, his teachings, his death, his resurrection, and his promises continue to surprise.

Years ago there was a movie entitled, “It Could Happen To You.” that starred Bridget Fonda and Nicholas Cage and it wasn't scary. Or maybe it was in a way.

In the movie, a New York cop named Charley is having coffee in a little diner. Finished, he reaches into his pocket to pay and to leave his usual tip, but finds that he has just enough money to pay for the coffee. There's not enough to tip the waitress. Embarrassed, he offers the waitress a choice. He promises to return the next day with double the usual tip. Or, taking a lottery ticket out of his billfold and holding it up, he promises to split the winnings, if any, of the lottery ticket he just purchased for that evening's drawing.

Now, Yvonne didn't need to hear that. She has had a bad enough day without losing a tip. In fact, her life is the pits. She hates her job as a waitress. Her runaway husband has run up her MasterCard balance so high that just that afternoon she had been in court to declare personal bankruptcy. Could things get worse? Still, she is good natured about it. She smiles helplessly at her bad luck, forfeits Charley's promise of tomorrow's pocket change, and jokingly takes Charlie up on his offer of half the lottery ticket's potential winnings.

The ticket beats the incredible odds, and wins \$4 million. Charley comes to the diner the next morning to give Yvonne the good news. Her tip for serving a cup of coffee is not a mere two bits, but two million dollars.

Well, you can imagine Yvonne's reaction to this good news. At first, utter disbelief covers Yvonne's face. "NO. NO. WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME? IS THIS SOME SORT OF CRUEL JOKE? NO. IT COULDN'T HAPPEN."

Then, as Charley insists he is not joking, a tiny flicker of hope registers deep inside Yvonne. She dared just for a moment to believe Charley's good news was true. "Yes? Yes?" she asks with her eyes widening. Why is it so hard to believe?

As the largeness of Charley's gift grips her, she suddenly finds herself dancing, swirling through the tables of customers, contemplating her new life, a life forever changed by Charley's free gift. The little New York diner is the scene of unexpected, overwhelming, hard-to-believe joy. (1)

Our gospel lesson takes us to another scene of unexpected, overwhelming, hard-to-believe joy. This story comes, not from New York, but from the New Testament. The scene is not entirely unlike that little New York diner. There is fish on the grill, and sadness and confusion in the air. The disciples of the slain Jesus have come together for a little refreshment. Like Yvonne they have accepted their fate. Their leader was dead. Their hopes that Jesus would redeem Israel were bankrupted. Had their Jesus not said as much while hanging on the cross? "It is finished." Dared they think their rabbi could defeat death? What are the chances of that happening? One in 10,000,000 would be wonderful odds. Defeat death? No one ever had. The chances were more like one in ten billion, one in ten zillion.

Suddenly, Jesus was in the midst. Was Jesus really in the midst, or instead only

in the mist? Listen to Luke's description of the disciples' reaction. "Startled and terrified, they thought they were seeing a ghost."

This week I went to the movies and I saw "Paul the Apostle." I've seen many movies about the life of Christ. On Easter Sunday evening there was a live production of the Broadway play Jesus Christ Superstar that featured John Legend as Jesus and Alice Cooper as Herod ... but until this week I had not seen a major motion picture on the life of Paul.

The movie told of Paul's life from the perspective of Luke, the author of this morning's Gospel. This movie depicted Luke writing his sequel, some of the Book of Acts of the Apostles from one of the people who lived out those Acts, from testimony of Paul.

In addition to writing the gospel of Luke and its sequel Acts, Luke was a physician. There was some talk in the early church that maybe Jesus was a ghost when he came back. Luke says that Jesus was not a ghost. He was not a shadow of his former self; he was his former self restored to life, victorious over death. This is not a metaphysical encounter, but a physical one. It was not an illusion, not a dream, but flesh and bone and blood. As a physician, for Luke everything was either black or white. Physically, Jesus, who on Good Friday was completely dead, is now so completely alive that he wants something to eat. **2**

For me, the report that Jesus did eat a piece of fish and it didn't go into his mouth and fall to the floor at his feet was proof that Jesus wasn't a ghost. It also gives me hope that the Biblical promises of banquets in heaven are more than "pie in the sky by and by" wishful thinking.

Jesus tries to assure his friends that what they are seeing is real. The impossible has happened. "Why are you frightened, why do you have doubts in your hearts?"

How did the disciples to receive such glorious news? Like Yvonne, they sway back and forth between exhilaration and the horrible possibility that someone is playing a cruel joke on them. "In their joy," says Luke, "they were disbelieving, and still wondering." It was too good to be true. It was too hard to believe.

If I were to ask in what life situations we might expect to be gripped with enthusiasm and joy so unexpected that we "disbelieve in joy," would church be one of your answers? For many, the church is the last place to be found disbelieving in joy. The happenings of church are too ordinary, too every day, too common.

Leonard Sweet says that's the church's fault. "The church has allowed itself to become stodgy instead of scintillating, ... cerebral instead of celebratory, respectable instead of rambunctious. We have trudged the well-worn path of predictability." **3**

I'm not suggesting the church should put cheerleaders on staff to teach us to do the wave. Still, the church is alive, and we must show ourselves alive, conveying a truth so grand that the world can only wonder at the largeness of God's gift.

Maybe your picture of that sort of excitement is winning half of \$4 million in the lottery like Yvonne in the movie "It Could Happen to You." Would that get you excited? What if you were to have the Publishers Clearing House Prize Patrol to knock on your door with an oversized check, cameras rolling to catch your wide-eyed enthusiasm as you stumble to the door in your bathrobe?

Maybe you could win a new car by buying the winning ticket from one of your Rotary Friends for the Baytown Rotary Shrimp and Catfish Fry on May 5th and be the 1 in 1,000 winner of a Toyota Tacoma or a Honda CRV? After all, what did Jesus eat in our gospel lesson to prove he was not a ghost? A FISH—Maybe it was a catfish! You too can follow Jesus' example and eat fish by buying a ticket for our Shrimp and Catfish Fry! Don Coffey and I have tickets!

The followers of Jesus continued to experience him after his death, but in a radically new way. They no longer experienced him as limited by time and space, but as one who could be experienced anywhere, anytime. This experience has continued through the centuries, ranging from dramatic encounters to a quieter sense of a presence that is felt to be the living Christ. This Jesus is not a figure from the past, but of the present.

In his sermon Recognizing Jesus, Thomas Yorty writes,

"Years ago the Standard Oil Company changed its name from ESSO to EXXON. Perhaps you remember the public campaign. For months, the famous "put a tiger in your tank" tiger was pictured on a large sign climbing a stepladder to the top of the local gas station's ESSO sign. With a big smile on his face, the tiger held in his arms the new EXXON sign. Then one day, Standard Oil stations across America no longer had their old ESSO signs, but new EXXON signs. It was a clever campaign. If the new EXXON signs just showed up one day without any warning everyone would have been confused. "What happened to the ESSO station?" It took a time of transition.

In the early church it took time for Jesus' followers to realize that the post-Easter Jesus, the Risen Jesus, was the same Jesus they knew in Galilee, but also different in important ways. That's what the resurrection appearances in Matthew, Luke and John are for. They helped those first disciples recognize the post-Easter Jesus. Before Easter, they knew him by the sound of his voice, the muscle of his arm, the stride of his gait. After Easter they would learn to recognize Jesus in new ways." 4

In the New York Diner when Yvonne finally accepted Charley's message, she said, "Why? You don't have to give me this gift. Why are you doing this?"

Charley's reply was, "Because a promise is a promise."

When we accept God's great gift, we might ask a question similar to Yvonne's. "God, why are you doing this? I like to think God's answer is something like, "Because a promise is a promise."

Even though it is hard to believe, God's promise has come true. Death has been swallowed up in victory! Not only Could it Happen, it did happen, TO YOU, and to me. The victory is yours if you will accept this free gift...even though and especially when ... it is hard to believe.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we know the world is waiting on us. We know you are waiting on us. We read the headlines and the lines that follow. We know that there are folks out beyond our walls, beyond our city limits that would greatly benefit from the message you have given us to share. Forgiveness of sins can result from mere repentance. Eternal destinations can be booked as a result of our sharing. Fill us with your spirit as you did for your followers who heard this initial charge to the people so that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations.

We thank you for curiosity that leads to learning, for the willingness to move beyond what is already known. Use the spirit of inquiry to prod us out of complacency, and make us impatient to know more of your truth. By the gift of your Spirit, give us an insatiable longing to see your will accomplished. Guide us to the scriptures in search of wisdom, and give us the discipline to pursue the quest.

We thank you for trials that test our allegiance, and the brokenness within that is the prelude to new growth. When we shy away from suffering confront us with the courage of Jesus, who endured on our behalf. When we avoid sacrifice, chasten us with your judgment and fill us anew with zeal. You have called us your children. Help us to grow as faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.

1. From It Could Happen To You, starring Nicolas Cage and Bridget Fonda, Tristar Entertainment, an Andrew Bergman film, 1996.
2. ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., A Ghost Does Not Have Flesh and Bones, by Keith Grogg.
3. From the sermon, "'Count Your Wows!'" by Leonard Sweet in HOMILETICS, Volume 9, Number 2.
4. Recognizing Jesus, by Thomas H. Yorty