

Quick Pivot

Luke 24:36-48

April 14, 2024

First Presbyterian, Luling

Have you ever said on, say a Tuesday morning, “Wow, it’s been a long week!” And then someone else says, “But it’s only Tuesday!” It’s just that some days are fuller, more varied, packed full of activities and interactions and feelings. You may realize you’ve had one of these full days only when you sit down at supper, after it’s all said and done. Or if it’s a really full day, you may sit down at the supper table and realize you still have a number of things to accomplish before bed. A full day isn’t the same as just being busy, though. For me, it’s the variety of the things I’m doing and especially the intensity of the feelings associated with those things.

For the disciples and their companions on Easter evening, wow it’s been a long week, and it’s only Sunday night. First there was the discovery of the empty tomb, then a couple of them were walking to Emmaus and had an extended encounter with a man who turned out to be Jesus. They turned around and high-tailed it back to Jerusalem to tell all the others about this amazing experience, and poof! Jesus appears again right in the middle of them. This is all in one day! It’s still Easter Sunday evening.

Not only were there all of these events, but listen to the emotion words used to describe the disciples. In the order they appear: startled, terrified, frightened, doubts, joy, disbelieving, wondering. That, my friends, is the definition of a full day, and it’s just one of their three encounters with the resurrection. These encounters are intense, and the emotions connected to them are intense.

Did you hear the quick pivot from frightened to joy? In between those two is where Jesus shows them his body and says, “It is I,” echoing the divine name that God gave to Moses at the burning bush. The very real presence of their Lord has turned their emotions around.

I want to backtrack and bit and pause to look at this particular phrase in verse 41: “In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” There’s a lot packed into that phrase, and it’s striking to me in its mixture of so many contradictory feelings. Joy, disbelief, wonder. I want to clarify that the word “wonder” there is not a synonym for disbelief or doubt. Luke has already told us they still were disbelieving. So it’s not “I wonder if that’s really Jesus.” Instead, it’s the same word that’s used elsewhere in the gospels for awe or amazement, so it’s

that kind of wonder. “O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made.” That kind of wonder. An awe or amazement. It makes for awkward English to say In their joy there were disbelieving and still amazing. Or still awe-ing. It doesn’t work. I assume that’s why they made it wonder, so they could say disbelieving and still wondering and make it work together. In that one sentence, that one phrase, the emotions are joy and disbelief and awe all at the same time.

That mixture of emotions doesn’t happen very often for us, but we know it when we feel it. From what I’ve heard, those who witnessed the totality of the eclipse this past Monday had that exact mixture of feelings. Joy—so many stories of people spontaneously clapping and cheering when the moon completely covered the sun and it got dark. Or applauding when the clouds cleared at just the right time. Disbelief—is it going to happen? Did that just happen? The sun is coming back, right? And especially awe. I heard that from a lot of friends. A whole body, deep-seated, feeling of awe and wonder and amazement.

I was thinking about how it might have felt to experience a total eclipse in a pre-scientific age. They would definitely have had that terrified feeling the disciples experienced when Jesus appeared out of nowhere. And disbelief that something so cosmic was happening. And joy and huge relief when the sun reappeared and continued on as normal in the coming days.

A friend was telling me that she had experienced a total eclipse on her honeymoon, in the 1970s, on an island on the Caribbean side of Costa Rica. An island that could be accessed only by dugout canoe. The visitors all knew about the eclipse and were expecting it. But the people who lived on the island, as you might expect, especially in the 1970s, had no idea what was happening. They were scared to death when it got dark in the middle of the day, gathered their children, ran inside and hid. They were terrified.

The quick pivot from pure terror to the unique mix of joy and disbelief and awe comes after a glimpse of the reality of God. The disciples felt that pivot after seeing the reality of the resurrection. That same pivot is repeated in other resurrection stories. Modern humans stumble on this mixture of feelings only rarely. And from what I can observe, it comes mostly after we glimpse the reality and power of God. The Milky Way. The depths of the ocean on a scuba trip. The birth of a baby. We feel something on those occasions, a deeper awe.

After this mixture of feelings, Jesus explains scripture to them and tells them they are witnesses to these things. Witnesses to all he had taught them throughout his ministry, witnesses to what he had just told them about Scripture.

Witnesses to what they had themselves seen and heard and touched. And witnesses to what they had felt, their terror and joy, their disbelief and wonder.

We are witnesses too, witnesses to what we have learned and seen and heard and touched. And especially we are witnesses to what we have felt, in the fullness of each day. Let's not keep the joy and disbelief and wonder to ourselves.