

**Sermon: Aftermath**

New North Church

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

14 April 2024

Based on **1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48**

Lately, our readings have reminded me of certain songs and musicians. Last week, it was Norman Greenbaum and today it's Bob Dylan. There's a tune on his 2006 *Modern Times* album called *Spirit on the Water*. It starts out as a song about Creation but quickly turns into a love song. Buried in the middle, there's the lyric, 'You ever seen a ghost? No / But you have heard of them.'

The disciples in Luke's Gospel certainly had heard of ghosts, and not in a good way. Ghosts were fearsome beings, disembodied spirits bent on havoc and destruction; they were just bad news all around. And when Jesus suddenly stood among them, that's what they thought they were seeing. It's no wonder they were startled and terrified.

In the space of just a few verses, Luke tells us they were also frightened, doubtful, joyful yet disbelieving, and still wondering. Their emotions were all over the map.

Jesus told them to look and see, to touch, and then, to set them at ease, he asked for something to eat.

They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he ate it in their presence, doing something that no ghost could or would do.

After proving he was real, and hungry, the risen Christ 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.'

He's repeating what he said to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, except this time, he included the psalms. He opened their minds to understanding by saying the entirety of Scripture essentially points to him.

What was written about him in the law of Moses appears in Deuteronomy, when the LORD replied to Moses: 'I will raise up for them a prophet *like you* from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command' (18:17-18).

Jesus also said, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.’ The problem here is that there is no known passage in pre-Christian Jewish literature that mentions such a Messiah who rises from the dead, so this may have been Luke’s embellishment of the story to which the disciples are witnesses.

Despite all this, it was not until verse 52 that the disciples finally recognized Jesus and worshipped him as he ascended to heaven.

Luke’s Gospel shows us that belief and understanding do not come all at once. Our lived experience can get us there, as the disciples learned. And if we ever tell ourselves, well, it’s too late, the good news is that Jesus did not give up on helping his followers to understand and he won’t give up on us.

Last week, we spoke about Thomas’ doubt and his insistence that seeing is believing. Today, we heard how the disciples doubted but even in their joy, they didn’t believe and still wondered. It took Jesus to open their minds – again – through Scripture.

The LORD knows it isn’t easy – reading a given passage over and over may not be anyone’s idea of an afternoon well-spent, but if you stay with it, fresh insight will come to you by way of the Holy Spirit.

We like to say that ours is a faith seeking understanding, and Jesus taught that studying Scripture was one way to gain that understanding, because it all points to him.

Coming to belief and understanding through Jesus Christ is God’s gift to put our feet on solid ground where we can then stand firm in our faith.

Not one of us is perfect; we’re all guilty in some way, yet, by his love, Jesus dropped the charges, so to speak. The peace he offered to the disciples – and by extension, us – was God’s *shalom*, and with that peace and by his own presence, Jesus brings tranquility of the soul for those who abide in him with every blessing.<sup>1</sup>

Luke’s Gospel uses the backdrop of the shared meal to bring people together in community, promoting what we might call inclusiveness. Here and there in the Gospel, Jesus dines with five groups of people: tax collectors and sinners; religious leaders; women; people in general; and his friends and disciples.

Unsurprisingly, Jesus uses these occasions to turn things on their head.

Situations that generally start out in one way, with conflict or controversy of some kind, typically end with some form of forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation.

Luke is also famous for cliffhanger endings – quite often, we have to decide for ourselves how the rest of the story turns out. In the Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother, do the two brothers ever get over their differences? Luke doesn't say.

During his dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house, Jesus offered forgiveness to the woman who anointed his feet; we're not told what happened to the other guests who questioned Jesus' status as a prophet.

Shared meals in the new Christian tradition became the place where those who came to Jesus for forgiveness and repentance were always welcome.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus was made known to the two disciples in the breaking of bread. In today's story, the disciples offered Jesus the only thing they had to eat: a piece of broiled fish. In Jerusalem, a city not known for its fishing industry.

It's clear that when Jesus is at the table, it's not just to eat; he's ready to extend the good news to every person who wants to hear it.

In the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, the pirates follow The Code, the collected rules by which all pirates are bound. More than once, one character or another will say, "Well, they're not really *rules*; they're more like *guidelines*."

And that's Luke's strategy, to provide his readers and the church with 'guidelines' on ordering our lives around community, forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation, particularly around meals. And it's all centered on our faith, trust, and reliance in Jesus.

The Gospels come full circle back to the beginning because the story does not end here. Luke wrote his account for his friend, 'the most excellent Theophilus,' so that he would know the truth concerning the things about which he had already been instructed.

Just as God created the world out of darkness,<sup>2</sup> so God calls people into communities of faith, to receive the Holy Spirit to lead us into a life of purpose even as we grow into our faith and into the meaning of God's *shalom*. Knowing the truth makes us good witnesses in the aftermath of the things that happened in Jerusalem.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrasing Cyril of Alexandria from the fifth century.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Engle, ordination paper, delivered at the Church of the Pilgrimage, Plymouth, Mass., 11 April 2024.