

“Embracing the Risen Christ Requires Our Whole Being”

Luke 24:36b–48

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Most of you know that our son, daughter, and daughter-in-law are neuroscientists. As a result, quite a few of you have assumed that they got this gift from their mother, since I am a minister, but I have informed those who have inquired that Dana is a historian by education and enduring interest. I was supposed to be a mathematician or scientist, but something happened along the way, something about God and a sacred calling, though Dana has wondered whether I had Caller ID working that day... Rightly or wrongly, I have clarity about this calling.

I retain my interest in science, though Ian reminds me that I studied science in the dark ages. “Dad,” he says, rolling his eyes, “When you studied science, they hadn’t even sequenced the human genome.” Be that as it may, I still love science, and though I can take no credit for our daughter-in-law Brittany, I probably contributed something to Ian and Ali’s interests in neuroscience.

And I have been intrigued by the focus of their work. Ali has moved on to evolutionary genetics, but Ian and Brittany do sensory neuro work, which is fascinating. I would have thought that a sense like smell, which Ian studies, is about just that, the sense, whether you can smell. But it is a much more complex process of sensory input, neural messages, brain interpretation, and then more neural communication.

And please understand, I realize that any of our children hearing this would immediately correct how I have stated it in some way. But the part I think I have right is that it’s about more than just sensing. The brain and neural network are involved. We don’t just see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. Our whole being is involved in processing all this.

Something like this is going on in our reading from Luke 24. The disciples are interacting with the Risen Christ and trying to process this experience. We might assume that once they see him, they are

convinced that he is alive, but there is a disconnect between what they know — he is dead — and what they see. It will take more than a sensory experience to embrace this truth, to embrace the Risen Christ.

It begins with experience, a multisensory experience. The disciples see the Risen Christ with their eyes. They hear what he is saying with their ears. They are invited to touch him and see that he is not a ghost, he is real, but not only that, he is a fully physical being. This is assurance for these disciples and clarity for future readers of Luke who debate in the early centuries of the church whether the resurrected Christ takes on physical form or is some kind of ethereal being. In Luke's telling of the story, he is clearly quite physical.

In fact, he even asks, "Have you anything here to eat?" They give him some broiled fish and he eats it in their presence. I have to confess that this may be the closest I come to being like Jesus. He is trying to calm their fears and convince them that it is him, matters of eternal significance are at stake, and he wants to know if he can have some pizza or a cheeseburger? To be fair, he hasn't eaten much in recent days, but this Jesus is a man after my own heart! Where's the food?!

The experience is definitely sensory for the disciples and Jesus, but this is not enough to convince the disciples, Jesus' closest friends who have spent the most time with him, that he is alive. Luke says Jesus has to open their minds to understand the scriptures, to understand what he has been teaching them about how his death and resurrection would fulfill God's plan to redeem humankind. Luke the physician uses the term in a way that is almost surgical. Their minds are so closed to the possibility of his being alive, that he must pry them open.

In other words, to embrace the Risen Christ, they need more than their senses, they need their whole being, including their minds. They have lives to live, they have faith to express, they are called to give witness to their experience, and all this requires their whole being, a deeply personal, full-bodied experience with the Risen Christ, and then a thorough processing of this experience with open minds.

We need the very same thing, beginning with a personal experience with the Risen Christ. There is no such thing as a secondhand faith. It's

why Baptists have always insisted on believer's baptism, the need for each of us to respond to God-in-Christ for ourselves. There is no other way to give witness to faith. A witness can only speak to personal experience. There is no other way to live out our faith authentically. We must express our convictions, ask our questions, be honest about what we believe. It all begins with personal experience.

So, how do we have this personal experience with the Risen Christ? In Luke, Jesus just walks in on the disciples. Does this happen to us? Perhaps, sometimes, but not physically, in more mystical ways.

For example, last week I shared a story about a priest who visited an orphanage, and then heard the voice of Christ saying to him, "Touch my wounds," meaning his presence in the woundedness of the children at the orphanage. It was not an audible voice others could hear, it was an interior message from somewhere deep within the priest's being, but it was no less real. It was the voice of Christ speaking to him. We sometimes have such encounters, personal encounters with the Holy.

Other times we encounter the Risen Christ in some shared experience like worship. It's a part of why we gather together. First and foremost, we are here to give honor and praise to God, but we also seek intimate fellowship with God, we want to hear from God, we long to sense the Risen Christ moving among us, and often it is easier to do this in the presence of fellow believers who have the same yearnings.

It might be when children sing, it might be when the organ soars, it might be in a moment of silence in this sacred space that inspires us and points beyond the ordinary, but we do sense the Risen Christ's presence here. To name just one of many examples, I have heard numerous stories from people who have gazed at the window above the choir loft and found comfort in the image of Christ the Good Shepherd welcoming them, almost as if Christ's arms are physically embracing them.

We experience the presence of the Risen Christ in personal ways and in shared experiences and quite often in acts of service and love. People often ponder what builds community best. Times of fellowship are important. In the church, time devoted to Bible study and prayer are critical, as are worship experiences. But what binds people together the closest is serving alongside each other, extending love to those in need.

And such experiences not only bring us closer to each other, they also bring us closer to the Risen Christ. Jesus says he is present in the least of these in need. He is known to us most clearly when we are continuing his work in the clothing ministry, in a hospital room, at a cemetery, on a mission trip, anywhere and everywhere we follow in his path of kindness and compassion.

And we encounter the Risen Christ or at least are more aware of the Holy in what Marcus Borg called the thin places of life, those places where the distance between heaven and earth is very small — at birth and death, in a crisis we overcome, in one we do not but realize we are not alone. Somehow in these moments, we sense the presence of Another.

But as is the case for the first disciples, simply experiencing the presence of the Risen Christ is not always enough to convince us that Christ is alive and with us. People have different reactions to the same experiences. Two people see the same movie, “Casablanca” or “Gone with the Wind” — one loves it, the other hates it. Two people eat the same meal, chicken and waffles or Mexican quinoa — one devours it, the other spits it out. People even react differently to the same sermon.

I have told some of you about a comment my theology professor, Frank Tupper, made to his pastor at the time. “Steve,” he said, “That’s the third sweet Jesus sermon in a row you have preached. I don’t need to hear another one.” Steve replied, “Frank, I wasn’t taking to you.” No sermon is for everyone. We each have different needs at different times. And so, we hear things in different ways. We interpret any experience we have, and our interpretation is as important as the experience itself.

This is the case with our experiences with the Risen Christ. So, what enables us to process these experiences and thus embrace the Risen Christ fully? The first disciples have to have their minds opened to understand scripture and how it points to the possibility that Jesus could be alive and what the purpose of his resurrection is.

Those of us who have been in church all our lives may think we already know all we need to know about Jesus and scripture, but if the people who walk with Jesus his entire ministry still have something to

learn, still need to open their minds, we have something to learn and we need to open our minds, in some ways we may not even realize they are closed. We still need to study scripture and seek to discern what God is saying to us through it and all of life.

So, there are things we can do to process our encounters with Christ, but sometimes we need something different, something less dependent on us, a deeper trust in God. I think of the three-dimensional images we can see only when we relax our vision. Sometimes we try too hard to embrace the mysterious. God-in-Christ comes to us. Patient waiting and attentiveness, steeped in confidence that the Risen Christ is with us and for us, can enable us to see, understand, and believe.

And then, we may have an experience like Mary Magdalene has in John 20. She sees the Risen Christ standing right in front of her, but because she is so full of grief, she doesn't recognize him, she thinks he is the gardener. Only when he calls her by name, "Mary!" does she realize it is him. This may seem like a unique story, but there is something about being called by name that can penetrate our defenses.

A former colleague is now a schoolteacher working with special-needs children. Recently she decided to help a child who was arriving at school. He is blind, needs a wheelchair, and has limited use of his arms. She went to help calm him with her familiar presence, but as they entered the class, he asked who she was. He has cognitive delays and cannot see. But when she called him by name, he immediately knew who she was and knew he would be okay.

God-in-Christ comes to us and calls us by name, and when God does, we know Who is with us, and we know we will be okay. No matter what is going on in the world, no matter what is happening in our lives, we will be okay.

It takes our whole being to embrace this reality, all our senses, all our thoughts, all our emotions, but it is worth all we have. The Risen Christ moves among us. That is a reality we don't want to miss.