

Credible Witnesses
Luke 24: 36-48
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Last weekend, I had dinner with two women I have been friends with since elementary school. That's long enough to measure friendship not in years, but in decades! We have seen one another through the good, the bad, and the ugly. Our friendships have matured from teenage sleepovers, to birthday parties with our own children, to memorial services for our parents.

Last month, following the discovery of some suspicious lumps, one friend went through an anxious stretch of doctor visits, biopsies, surgeries, and pathology reports. Thankfully, it all resulted in the good news that everything is benign.

So, confronted with health scares, aging issues, and our inescapable mortality – AND being a fan of Monty Python – I jokingly named our meal as the “We’re NOT Dead Yet Dinner!”

Unfortunately, death notices do get published prematurely on occasion. One famous example happened in 1897 with Samuel Clemens, better known to most of us by his pen name, Mark Twain. While on a speaking tour in England, a rumor surfaced that Twain was gravely ill, which was followed quickly by a story he had died.

Trying to get verification on the report of Twain's demise, a journalist was sent to investigate. Not sure whether to be more amused or annoyed, Twain is remembered for joking, “The report of my death has been **grossly** exaggerated.”

In actuality, Mark Twain shared a slightly shorter response with the journalist: “The report of my death was an exaggeration.” Doesn't have the same punch, does it? Turns out, the adverb “grossly” was an embellishment added by the author of a popular biography of Twain, and it became the preferred version.

Mark Twain also made this claim in one of his novels, “*It is my belief that nearly any invented quotation, played with confidence, stands a good chance to deceive.*” In other words, if you say something with enough authority, people will believe you.

While fake news feels extremely pervasive and oppressive in our current political and social spheres, it isn't a new phenomenon. Embellishment, fabrication, and deception are as old as humanity itself. As a result, we want verifiable evidence to conquer our doubts. We demand hard facts to overcome our skepticism. No one likes being deceived.

On Good Friday, the disciples and friends of Jesus saw him brutally beaten, tortured, and crucified. Jesus died and was buried in a tomb. But in the dawning light of Easter morning, the massive stone had been rolled away, the tomb was empty, and Jesus' corpse could not be found.

Soon, stories of encounters with the Risen Lord began to circulate. Mary saw Jesus at the tomb. In Emmaus, two disciples recognized Jesus as the host at their table, when he broke bread with them.

Now gathered in Jerusalem, the disciples and friends of Jesus are trying to sort through all the evidence. What are true reports? What is fake news? Until they have a better understanding of the current situation, they take precautions. They hide behind locked doors, reducing the risk of being the next ones to be arrested, tortured, and killed.

Into the midst of this fearful and anxious gathering, Jesus suddenly appears, saying, "Peace be with you." The disciples are startled, terrified, and confused. The intensity of their disbelief is considerable, and peace is the last thing they feel!

The disciples first assume they are seeing a ghost. So, Jesus walks them through the evidence of his physical presence. "Look at my hands and feet.....Touch me and see.....A ghost does not have flesh and bones."

Jesus presents his own body as proof he is alive. See, these are the fingers that healed blind eyes; these are the hands that washed your dusty feet. Still the disciples remain unconvinced. Their minds race, as they try to comprehend. Luke uses a wonderful expression to describe their state of mind: "in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." It is too good to be true; it cannot be, and yet it is! There is great joy in seeing Jesus again; but what on earth does it mean?

Since seeing is not necessarily believing, Jesus tries another approach: "Have you anything here to eat?" he asks. Apparently, the risen Jesus is real, touchable, and also hungry! It's fun to imagine what thoughts might have popped into the heads of the disciples: "We should have gotten stronger locks for the door." "What is he going to do next?!?" "I can't believe Jesus took the last piece of broiled fish!"

Talk of resurrection stretches our minds and imaginations beyond our comfort zones. What sort of body did the resurrected Jesus have?

While having flesh and bones, and able to eat, this risen Jesus also can appear and disappear within locked rooms. And he is often difficult to recognize at first glance. Jesus isn't a ghost or disembodied spirit, and yet his risen body is different from the bodies we know. Somehow his fully human earthly body has been transformed into a new kind of heavenly body.

As Christians, we believe eternal life with God means an embodied life with God. On earth, our bodies are mortal – susceptible to aging, illness, and ultimately death. The

power and hope of Easter means we will experience new life in a new kind of body after our mortal death. Like Jesus, our bodies will be transformed through an act of new creation, in which God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more. (Rev. 21:4)

While fear, anxiety, and confusion initially paralyze the first disciples, once Jesus reminds them of his words and opens their minds to all of scripture something happens. The disciples drastically change. Instead of being frightened people sealed off in a locked room, they are transformed into bold, courageous, and credible witnesses sent out to share this good news to all people.

The first disciples did not simply repeat Jesus' teaching and parables throughout the Roman world. Instead, they boldly claimed Jesus is alive – Christ is risen! It didn't matter how bizarre their story sounded. It didn't matter how hard the prevailing authorities worked to silence them. It didn't even matter that being a witness often meant becoming a martyr. The disciples continued to proclaim the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, because they realized there was no deception in this surprising and joyful good news.¹

This was NOT fake news!

While the physical hands and feet of Jesus are no longer present, the ministry of countless hands and feet continue to bear witness to our risen Lord. Jesus does not come among us to enjoy broiled fish, but his loving presence is tangible through this congregation in meals shared with Safe Harbor and monthly donations so generously given to the West Chester Food Cupboard.

Likewise, the compassion of Jesus becomes a reality, when parents and children with Family Promise experience hospitality and emergency shelter from our community of faith.

As we heard proclaimed on Easter, Jesus does not like tombs. He certainly did not spend much time in his own. The death of Jesus should have been the end of the story, but the crucified Jesus will not stay dead and buried. Nor will he allow his friends to remain fearfully hidden behind locked doors – sealed off from the joy & fullness of life. The risen Christ appears among his startled and terrified disciples, moving them from doubt to faith, from fear to courage, from silence to bold proclamation. Jesus doesn't scold or shame his friends for their disbelief and fear. He just comes among us – meeting us where we are – and then he transforms us.

As our congregation discusses, discerns, and prays about the God Sized Dream of our future, may we embrace the power of Easter resurrection and hope. The risen Lord still comes among ordinary people – fearful, anxious, and confused – to bring peace, courage, and new life. Jesus is not dead and buried, and the church is not dead yet either. The risen Christ keeps returning to us, revealing who he is, and calling us to follow.”²

The continuing miracle of Easter is the possibility of ordinary people becoming capable of extraordinary things.³

In the coming months, look for Jesus to meet us where we are – to gather up our disbelief, joy, and wonder – and change us. As followers of Jesus, let us move from doubt to faith and from fear to courage. May we become credible witnesses of the risen Christ. We are not witnesses to fake news. But we are witnesses called and commissioned to share the peace, love, justice, compassion, and forgiveness of God with the whole world. May it be so. Amen.

¹ “Dead Man Down Under,” *Homiletics*, April 2009.

² William H. Willimon, “Easter Good News/Bad News,” *Pulpit Resource*, April 2012.

³ Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 80.