

**“Walking Through the Door”**

**Luke 24:36b-48**

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**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Easter**

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Give me a choice between two things I can argue the good in both sides. Everything from pacifism vs. just war, to pizza vs. Chinese. This means that like most formally educated people I am destined to live a life of “what if” dissatisfaction. What if we had chosen to attend this seminary instead of that one? What if we had chosen this hike instead of that one? What if we had chosen this ice cream flavor instead of that one. Usually, if I wait long enough, I’ll lose one of the options and the choice will be made by default.

Maybe that’s why I’m reluctant to take a position on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that I’m a believer in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, with doubts. I’m like an 80% believer. It’s tough to argue there’s a definitive way when you can see all the weaknesses in whatever argument you choose.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the Gospel story today and Luke takes a pretty straightforward position on this question. Jesus appears to the closest people in his life and tells them to touch him to see that it’s really him. He asks for food – a piece of broiled fish to be exact - so they can watch him eat. Ghosts don’t eat. He tells them stuff that only he told them in private so they could know that it’s *really* him. This *is* the resurrected Jesus, according to the text. Not a ghost. Not someone who looks like him. Not a figment of their imagination. But the *real* Jesus.

The 80% believer in me says this is what true faith is all about. As John Updike says in his poem, *Seven Stanzas for Easter*, “Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping, transcendence, making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages: Let us walk through the door.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, if you’re going to be a Christian, be a Christian! Go all the way with it! There are a lot of good reasons for walking all the way through the door. One is this focus on the body. “The body is the most specific, concrete object of our concerns,” Stephen Cooper writes. “To insist on the reality of the resurrection body is to demand that we accept our present reality as the place where transformations of ultimate significance take place.”<sup>2</sup> The resurrection of Jesus means that our faith is not mostly about what happens after death. It’s about the transformation of our lives and any talk of an afterlife has to be connected to our bodies in this life. That’s important since throughout the history of the church, bad things have happened to the bodies of those on the margins when theologians have made the faith into a disembodied spirituality. That’s one reason for walking through the door.

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<sup>1</sup> John Updike, “Seven Stanzas at Easter.”

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Cooper, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2008, p. 428.

Another reason is the insistence of the Bible that the Christian life fits the pattern of the resurrected Christ. If faith is only about some heavenly Christ divorced from the historical Jesus then the Christian faith, in the words of Fred Craddock, “can take on forms of spirituality that are without suffering for others, without a cross, without any engagement in issues of life in this world, all the while expressing devotion to a living, spiritual Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Christ *as an idea* gives rise to a church without solidarity with the poor, a church without solidarity with the suffering, a church without solidarity with the least of these. That’s the most dangerous kind of church of all. There’s another good reason for walking through the door.

Most of all there is hope. The resurrection goes to the heart of hope. It’s possibility beyond the probable. That what hope is. It’s the thing that leads people to struggle and resist and work and live with dreams that aren’t probable. It’s the possibility of reaching beyond the “humdrum laws” as Denise Levertov calls them:<sup>4</sup> “gravity, mortality.” The things that keep us from opening to symbol’s power, that keep us accepting life or the world as we find it.

I think there are some very good reasons for walking through the resurrection door all the way into the Christian faith. And then there’s the 20% of me that sounds, eh, I’m not so sure I can walk all the way through. The part of me that knows that supernatural things work well in movies and books and plays – not in real life. The part of me that knows that mortality and gravity might be humdrum but when have you ever seen them overruled? The part of me that knows that Christians through the ages believed all sorts of things with their whole hearts that turned out to be absolutely wrong.

The pastor in me is also reluctant to walk all the way through the door. The pastor in me that’s reluctant to expect a healing miracle when I know the normal life expectancy for a particular disease, the pastor in me that will not tell someone going through a divorce to “look on the bright side,” the pastor in me that knows that sometimes the best hope that we have is solidarity in suffering, support that is given in the presence of death. It’s the part of me that wants truth as much as hope.

So how to reconcile these things within me? How to reconcile these things within a church? Here’s my tentative proposal. If you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus 100% of the time, hallelujah! I’m so happy for you. You’ve been given a tremendous gift of hope. There is no reason for me or anyone else to try to talk you out of it. Talking you out of it is the mistake of *some* of the modern atheists who are as fundamentalist as some of the Christians they despise. They demand conformity to something they know that none of us can prove or disprove. The best atheists & agnostics celebrate belief they do not have because they see the good works and wisdom that it can and does produce.

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Series*, (Louisville: John Knox Press), 1990, p. 290.

<sup>4</sup> Denise Levertov, “On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus,” *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov* (New York: New Directions, 2013).

But if you lean toward my 20% I want to try out on you the “As If” philosophy of Kwame Anthony Appiah that I’ve been reading. This is going to make your head hurt, so I’m asking for your intense concentration for these last 5 minutes. Appiah draws on an earlier philosopher who says that “the object of the world of ideas as a whole is not the portrayal of reality – this would be an utterly impossible task because no human brain can conceptualize it. The object of the world of ideas is rather to provide an *instrument for finding our way about more easily in the world.*”<sup>5</sup> No world of ideas can possibility represent the truth because our minds aren’t big enough to encompass it. So “there is a gap between what is true and what is useful to believe.”<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Appiah says, “most of our thought is best understood as fiction.”<sup>7</sup>

Appiah argues that this is as true in the discipline of science as it is anywhere else. For example, the pressure law tells us “that the pressure of a gas, held within a vessel, will rise as the temperature rises, increasing in proportion to the absolute temperature.”<sup>8</sup> But this is only an approximation – the predictions are only roughly right for details I will footnote but not explain.<sup>9</sup> The pressure law then isn’t “true” because it can’t predict outcomes in all times and all circumstances. It is “roughly right” and therefore a useful belief.<sup>10</sup>

Appiah goes on to talk about our capacity to work with many models of the world at the same time, models that are not completely consistent. Children who make mud pies and invite playmates to share in “baking” their pie in their playground kitchen, but don’t actually eat them. Adults who attend plays and cry at the death of a protagonist they know is not “real.” The tears are as real as the ones shed at an actual death. It is *as if* someone had died. Crying in the theater over the death of a character isn’t a choice to suspend my disbelief that someone has died. I

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<sup>5</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *As If: Idealization and Ideas*, (Cambridge: Harvard), 2017. He draws heavily on the philosopher Hans Vaihinger whose magnum opus, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (The Philosophy of “As If”) was published in 1911, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> 5.

<sup>7</sup> 5.

<sup>8</sup> 18.

<sup>9</sup> “as the molecules of the gas get bigger and more complex, for example, the relationship between pressure and temperature is far from linear. The pressure law is useful for some gases over a range of temperatures – and better over a wider range for gases composed of smaller molecules – because it gets the pressure-temperature relationship roughly right.” 19.

<sup>10</sup> “The purpose of thought is to keep us constantly in a position to deal with things so that, with given conditions, relations, stipulations, and circumstances, we may receive an exactly ascertainable ‘sense-impression’ (for every determination of objective data ultimately rests on that, and can be established in no other way); and so that, by such and such an impulse under such conditions, we may produce an exactly ascertainable effect, which in its turn cannot be observed except by means of certain sensations” (in Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie*, 5).

still know that an actor on the stage is playing make believe. It's a choice, rather, to give up some of the normal consequences of that belief.<sup>11</sup>

And here's where it gets interesting. "This capacity is only possible," Appiah writes, "because our minds are *not* unified." It's only possible because I choose not to live in the world with a single consistent view. "It is our imperfection," Appiah writes, "that allows us to work, not with a single picture of the world, but with many."<sup>12</sup>

I think this is why at the end of the day, I can neither give up my belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, nor the possibility that it is a fiction. It is also why I can accept that resurrection is not possible under most circumstances, but "most circumstances" is different from never. Maybe it's "roughly right" because it describes a truth about God's love and grace and power that our minds can't comprehend and therefore it's useful to believe.

And maybe this is a new possibility for the future of a church that has sought unity in the past only through its creedal formulations. A future where the line is not rigidly drawn between those who profess a narrowly proscribed belief or not, but a community that is flexible enough to welcome those who are willing to engage our Christian story in more than a single, unified view. Those who are willing to engage the story at various levels of "as if" because we know that our current worldviews are insufficient without the Jesus-story to disrupt them.<sup>13</sup>

This is frightening to many in the church today. So much so that the possibilities that I've lifted up this morning would be judged by some as heretical. But fear is where Jesus usually meets disciples. The story for today *ends* with the minds of the disciple opened by Jesus to the scriptures. But the movement in the text is from fear and disbelief to communion that *then* leads to understanding.

Accepting that movement means accepting people wherever they are on that continuum, trusting with the disciples that God finds a way to reach us. Resurrection hope, after all, is about possibility beyond the probable. It's about the possibility of life that is beyond our capacity to grasp or understand it. It's about the possibility of a God beyond our capacity to envision or conceive. It's the God who lives as if death doesn't have the final word, as if there is a reign of love and justice near to us, as if there is more to this world and to you life that you can see. As if there was a door to a new life we could walk through together.

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<sup>11</sup> Appiah draws on Kendall L. Walton's work here, pp. 105-111.

<sup>12</sup> Appiah 110.

<sup>13</sup> It's notable I think that Denise Levertov in her poem, makes a statement about her belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus while also speaking in metaphor – the only tools that poets have. And of those on the other side of the belief line she asks questions to provoke rather than to shut down or exclude. John Updike, too, in his poem arguing for belief in the physical resurrection organizes his poem around the statement "if he rose at all. . ." "*If* he rose. . ." - It's as if even the most honest believers among us have to allow for doubts that everyone living in this life knows to be obvious.