

April 15, 2018

A Place to Call Home

Title: You're Family

Scripture: Acts 3:12-19

1 John 3:1-3

Luke 24:36b-48

As I was sitting down to prepare this sermon, an ad came on the television asking, "Is your identity on the dark web?" Identity theft is becoming an all too common threat. Throughout our scriptures today there is a theme of identity – who was Jesus? Who are we?

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear Jesus called a servant of God, "Holy and Righteous One", "Author of Life" and "Messiah". In our opening hymn this morning, we sang about Jesus being the "risen, conquering Son, Lord, glorious Prince of Life".

We heard two readings that involved Jesus' disciples. In the first, the reading from Luke, the disciples and others were in a room in Jerusalem, when Jesus appeared to them. This follows the story of two followers of Jesus, Cleopas and an unnamed person (possibly Mrs. Cleopas?) walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. On the way they met a stranger who they did not know was Jesus, risen from the dead.

They were too focused on their disappointment and problems to recognize him. We might also note that they were walking in the wrong direction. They were walking away from the fellowship of believers in Jerusalem. Like them, we are likely to miss Jesus when we withdraw from the strength found in other believers when we become preoccupied with our dashed hope and plans.ⁱ

Jesus interpreted the Scripture to them, trying to help them to understand what Moses and the prophets had said about him. But they still did not know who he was.

When they arrived in the village, they invited him to spend the night with them. At the table, as he took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them, they recognized who he was, and he disappeared from their sight. “They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scripture to us?’ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.’” Then the two told what had happened on the way and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them”.ⁱⁱ

Here we have Luke’s account of the same appearance that we heard about from John last week. Luke and John highlighted some different pieces but they both agree that Jesus showed them his hands and his feet to prove that it was really him. Luke adds that while they were joyous, they were still disbelieving and wondering, so Jesus then asked them for food to prove that he was not a ghost but a real person standing in front of them. At the same time, he was different. He had simply disappeared from the table in Emmaus and had simply appeared here in Jerusalem. Things we don’t really understand, and don’t need to understand, but important ways of showing his disciples that he was real, he was alive, he was not a ghost, yet, he was somehow different, this risen Jesus.

Luke tells us that he then, opened their minds to help them understand the scriptures about how the Messiah was to suffer and to rise

from the dead on the third day. Important to us today, is what was also to happen, “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Luke, the author of this gospel, was doing exactly that. Luke was a doctor, a man of science, a Greek, and a man of detail. Unlike Matthew, Luke did not write to a Jewish audience. Luke wrote to the Greek speaking world, doing exactly what Jesus said was to be done, proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. We know that Luke was a close friend and traveling companion of Paul – the great missionary. What Luke learned about Jesus, his life and ministry, he learned from interviewing the disciples, from paying attention and from traveling with Paul.

Jesus told his followers that “You are witnesses of these things.” Witnesses who were given the responsibility to share what they had seen and learned.

Luke is also the author of the sequel book, The Acts of the Apostles. In this book we hear many accounts of the early church. We hear about church organization and relationships; but we also hear about the work of the Holy Spirit, the implications of grace and the law of love.

And so we hear in the reading today from Acts, Peter’s response to something that happened while he and John were going to the temple to pray – about three in the afternoon. A man who had been crippled from birth was being carried to the temple to be placed by the gate where he begged every day from those who were going into the temple. Peter told him that he did not have any money to give him, but “what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went

with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him... The people were astonished and came running to them.”ⁱⁱⁱ That’s when Peter spoke what we heard this morning.

Peter, the same man who had been the headstrong impulsive disciple who was always with Jesus. Peter, the same man who had become so afraid that he denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Peter, the same man to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection. Peter, the same man who had been locked with the others in the upper room on the day of Jesus’ resurrection. This same Peter, now changed by the Risen Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, had been transformed. This same Peter now boldly proclaimed the name of Jesus in healing, boldly spoke about who Jesus was in public. Now when given an audience, Peter capitalized on it and took the opportunity to share Jesus Christ.

Peter’s faith is no longer a private matter. Now it is a public obligation, compelling him to act for the sake of the Gospel. Christ’s resurrection moves all disciples – including us – to action. We continue to be learners, but we are also to be teachers and leaders. We continue to discern but we are also called to action. But it’s not always easy – or comfortable.

When we are asked to identify ourselves, we often give our name, but we may also add descriptors that tell more about us. Frequently, those descriptors may tell something about our roles; we are teachers, students, clerks, doctors, nurses, managers, workers. Those descriptors may identify our relationships: mother, father, grandparent, friend. They may describe the groups we belong to.

Who we are makes a difference in the way we live. As children, because we belonged to a particular family, there were certain things we were expected to do or not do because of who we were. In the three readings from today we are called, “Friends, Witnesses, Children of God, Beloved, God’s children.” We are not only “called” children of God, but it is our identity, we really are children of God. We are God’s children because of God’s love. Like all children, we develop the characteristics of the family. God’s children are called to walk in the way of Christ. We are made in God’s image and as we heard in 1st John, one day we will be like him even more fully.

We also heard that the world does not recognize us or know us because the world does not know God. Throughout history, and I believe especially true today, our behavior does not always show that we are God’s children. There are many who are outspoken about being Christians but whose behavior seems to be so very different from what Christ has taught us to be do and do.

We all make mistakes. We all do things that would not make God proud, but I worry when I see people using their identity as Christians as a justification for behavior that seems to me to be so contradictory to what Jesus taught. I get upset when I hear words of judgment coming from the mouths of those who claim to be Christian leaders. I get frustrated and angry when I see hatred, exclusion, lack of mercy and love coming from those who claim to speak for Christ. It helps me understand why those who do not know Christ would not want to.

It is no surprise to me that so many in the world do not recognize the love of God when it is not shown in the lives of those who profess to be followers of the God of love. But regardless of how I feel, or what I think,

God has still claimed and named all of us as God's children. God still loves each and every one of us, even the ones who I may find the most difficult to love.

I hear several things in today's scriptures about who we are, how we as the family of God are expected to be and live. Even though we may fall short of the ideals, we are still called to be active members of the family. It is up to us to live so that others cannot steal our identity as God's children and try to turn that identity into something that does not glorify God.

Remember that no matter what happens in our lives, or around us, we are still God's beloved children. We are invited to experience the joy that comes in relationship with God and to remember that God always gives us more than enough love. We are to live as those who expect miracles in life. Jesus comes to us in the midst of our ordinary lives. We need to keep our senses at the ready, enter into the day with eyes open and ears ready to experience what God might be doing in our lives or in the world. Jesus came to the disciples and ate a meal with them. Jesus come to us in the day to day things of life.

We are those who are called to stand up for what is right. Even when no one else sees our good works, or when it takes courage to speak truth to situations that demean others, we are called to do what is right.

We are people who rest safely in God's arms. When all around us seems horrible – God still holds us safely in God's arms. When we hear that terrible diagnosis and we are so very afraid – God still holds us in God's arms. When it is time to pass from earthly life to eternal life, whether that comes when we are ready or much too soon, God still holds us safely in God's arms.

In the Upper Room Disciplines this week, I read, “We contemporary Christians have centuries of faithful believers sharing the story of Jesus. We have numerous translations of the Bible, thousands of books written about the Christian faith, opportunities for small-group spiritual growth. Yet even those of us who regularly attend worship and hear the story of Jesus told again and again may have ho-hum moments. Sure, Jesus lived among humanity as an example of how to conduct our lives. Oh, yeah, he died and by the way, rose from the dead. Our familiarity with the story causes us to overlook its power. Like the disciples, we need to be shaken up, to hear Jesus tell us, ‘You’re the witnesses.’”^{iv}

Who are we? We are family. We are children of God. We are persons with plenty, believers in miracles. We are witnesses to God’s power and faithful followers. We are persons who seek to do right, and we are persons who rest safely in God’s arms.

Let us pray.

Glorious God help us remember that no matter what happens that each of us is your beloved child. Help us to experience the joy that comes in relationship with you and to remember that you always give us more than enough. Help us to be open to the miracles that you have in store for us and for the world. Jesus, help us know what it means to be your witness to the world. Strong God of love, give us strength to always do the right thing to protect those who need protecting, and to show the love of Jesus in everything we do. Help us to give thanks for how you have worked and are working in our lives in both good days and bad. Amen.^v

ⁱ NIV, Life Application Bible, Note on Luke 24:13ff

ⁱⁱ Luke 24:32-36a

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 3:6b-11 NIV

^{iv} Upper Room Disciplines 2018, p. 129

^v Adapted from Upper Room Disciplines 2018, Week of April 9-15