

**April 18, 2021**

Luke 24:33-48

*Just Like You*  
**The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers**

There are few things as nerve-wracking as having a newborn baby, a toddling 2-year old, and a Thanksgiving feast to prepare for 15 people. But such was the case soon after my son Luke was born, when my eldest, Charlie, was in that phase when biting someone seems to be the solution to everything. We were hosting Jim's family, whom I lovingly refer to as "the tall people." Every one of them, including the twin boys, are over 6 feet. My two 6'7 brothers-in-law are loud and proud Ohio Buckeyes, but especially that weekend. My house feels very small when these height-gifted people come to load up on touchdowns and tryptophan. Charlie was watching from the front window when the family drove up, and as his uncles and cousins unfurled their long legs from their Honda mini-vans. I went out to greet them, excited for them to meet the boys. Hugs and kisses were offered as we made our way through the front door to find Charlie gone. The big people were scary to him and he'd gone hiding. The search began, checking every room and closet. Becoming more panicked, we checked the basement, the backyard, under the beds, calling... Then, I remembered the pond — 50 yards away. I stayed with the baby while the Buckeyes took off into the field behind our house, and frantic, I prayed, collected myself, and revisited every possible place he could be. Finally, on the last pass, there was my little Chaz - curled up in the bottom of the linen closet — where I had *already* looked *twice*. In my fear and panic, I couldn't see. In his fear and panic, he couldn't move.

At every age, and in particular situations, fear can be disabling, can muddle clear thinking, and impact how we process our surroundings. Perhaps you have, at some point, been so afraid of something that your normal senses were either dulled or unavailable. The fear that comes with a lump in your breast, a policeman at your door, breaking news of gun violence in a school where you know people work and learn, a suspicious text message on your spouse's phone, a computer hacker getting access to your financial data — these kinds of things can bring a gripping fear. In this pandemic, in addition to acute fear, chronic anxiety runs rampant with too many of our young people. We wonder what to do about it. We've been told that faith is the antidote to fear, but how much faith?

In this season of Eastertide, we move beyond the empty tomb moment and its meaning to the mandate that Christ's rising gives. Death is destroyed, life abundant and eternal are ours to claim — all because Jesus took the burden of our humanity to the cross. Our grateful response is to take on his ministry, that this Good News must be shared. Just as the fear of the first Holy Week lingered on for his friends, it lingers for us, too. The trauma of Good Friday remains. The evil and brutality that existed in Jesus' world is still present in our world. That sad reality does not relax the requirements of faith. It makes them more urgent.

In the 24th chapter of Luke, Jesus's 11 disciples were dealing with a whole lot of fear — and doubt, as well. Their teacher, Jesus, betrayed by one of his own, was strung up and tortured. His followers were so scared that in Emmaus, their beloved leader was unrecognizable, unable to be known— until the breaking of the bread brought a flash of recognition. Now, they've rushed back to

Jerusalem to tell the gathered others, armed with new information, an account of a dead man walking. Still bewildered and distressed, into their collective conversation full of doubt and confusion, Jesus inserts himself. It's a moment both dazzling and terrifying. *Look. Touch.* See that I am human like you.

Asking his disciples to look and to touch, Jesus invites them to let their senses break them through their fear, to move aside their doubts, and find a way to be present with him, fully alive, now. But even then, the men, shaken and stirred, remain a cocktail of confusion and fear and doubt. So, Jesus tries a new tactic — “Have you anything here to eat?” A dead man does what only the living can do — taste, swallow, digest — what he does helps them realize he's not dead at all. Seeing him, hearing his voice, touching his skin — no. Because it's not what they do — it's what he does that changes everything.

*In the midst* of their fear and disorientation, he makes himself known. Nothing here tells us that they are freed from their fear, or released from their doubts. Because they aren't. Despite what they don't lose, they do gain something — courage, conviction, and a call. These flawed friends — they are made witnesses. Look. Touch. Serve. This is their calling from that day forward, a call the Lord also saw fit to give to us. In our earliest days of faith, we saw and heard images and stories of God, then we entered into them more deeply as we grew, now strengthened in our believing. With good days of strong, comforting faith and small pockets of persistent doubts... we flawed friends serve the Lord. Witnesses are we all, told to bring others along.

Jesus' final command before he disappears again in Luke's version ends with the word *witness*. But this entire – final – conversation begins with the word *peace*. This is ironic — because few aspects of faith leave us as conflicted as the notion of witnessing. Testimony makes us testy. So many families have told me when planning a funeral for their loved one that “his faith was private.” “Mom always believed — but it wasn't something we ever discussed.” The word “witness” doesn't come with peace, but with fear. Surely it did for the 11. Witnessing wasn't the antidote to their fear, for they just lived through the penalty Jesus paid for preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins, and they were scared. For so many Christian people today, telling others about Jesus, and sharing the forgiveness of sins, talking about what we believe and what we find really hard to believe, and how we live faithfully within that honest assessment of our religion — raises fear — even dread. That's normal. We know talking about something so full of meaning, so personal, so full of questions and doubts and conflict — is extremely scary. A whole lot of Presbyterians love Jesus in a measured, methodical way — they share Jesus in how they live their lives, where they give their money and time, and by engaging Calvinism in wide-ranging issues from climate change to capital punishment to the coronavirus. That's okay. Presbyterians shun ostentation. But most also shun the expectation that they, as a part of their faith — must talk about it. Presbyterians might share a story of their faith in a rare family setting, or in a eulogy for a friend, or when required to become a church officer. Presbyterians are not door-knocking evangelizers, more door-dashing believers who will drop something off as long as they don't have come in and eat with you. But can we be more than okay? Eating with Jesus made it real for those disciples. Can we help make it real by sitting down at table together? This Eastertide call finds all of us when we are curled up in the bottom of the linen closet. Can we not do more? I think we can.

How are we to be witnesses? Recently, First Presbyterian has taken a few steps forward in this calling. One of our most creative members, John LeDuc, is better than most at talking about this faith, and last summer in the election cycle, he suggested we offer our own yard signs that simply make our name and website and worship known. And many of you have them (We have lots more, by the way). Even more of you placed our “Black Lives Matter: We have Work to Do” signs that bear our name and logo. Also an invitation to faith through the lens of social justice, something even more appealing to some of you. But now, our new strategic plan requires us to build more opportunities to share our faith. For those able to be vulnerable in this way, our summer email devotional will be authored by people willing to share a brief story of faith, hope, or blessing from their own life. We have fellowship groups

and support groups where your experiences can be shared. Maybe this is your calling to grow in living the Easter faith. Let that growing faith be your antidote to fear.

I don't know what lies beneath the particular fears or doubts that arise when you are held in this part of the Christian calling. I only know that my own antidote to fear of sharing faith is more than faith. It's something else, something missing in this story. Along with fear, and doubt being there, notice what is not there. Certainty. Being a witness does not require being sure.

When Jesus comes among us on Easter, he always asks us, "What is it — about me, and about this world — that you are so scared of? What is it about me — and this faith — that you doubt?" We ask ourselves that and we lead with it. Spend some time with that. Give those answers as gifts to God. Let God use those along with everything else you've got. For what are you afraid of sharing? The unconditional love of God, the power of forgiveness, the healing grace of self-acceptance, the compelling connection and compassion within community, the grace-led goodness of giving away ourselves to help others find their way, the life-giving freedom that comes with giving up our idolatry of power, privilege, and possessions? Those in pain, those who struggle, those who are hungry, those who are dying — they need us to find a way beyond fear and doubt. Someone needs you. Someone needs to know life now, life hopeful, live abundant and eternal. None of that requires certainty. Look. Touch. Know. Serve. The presence of Christ himself will keep that fear from blinding you and that doubt from binding you. In every part of your being, Christ has come into the room.

We have just had another mass shooting. This country's antidote to fear is not faith, but guns. A new Gallup poll shows that less than half of all Americans hold membership in a house of worship. Why? What is it that people see that makes them turn away instead of towards? What are they finding when they do enter, when they touch the life of these congregations, that leads them out the door?

About a year and a half ago the Strategic Planning Process was given the goal of creating a new mission statement, an accurate reflection of our calling, and something easily remembered. We arrived at this. First Pres' mission is to "make God's love visible." How many hours we debated that word — visible. Should it be visible? Or tangible? Are we here to help others see God's love — or to experience it in a deeper way? Finally we decided on visible. When I re-read the passage for this week, I knew that was the right choice.

Jesus says, "Look" and "touch." In those words, he is telling us what we have to do to be witnesses. We must make God's love visible. People will look whether they are invited to or not. Do they see love that overcomes our fears? Do they see courage to stand for something - someone? We must then ask people to touch us - to enter the depth of our community, to worship and serve alongside of us, to help us become the congregation God calls us to be. That's not only what we do — but what they are willing to do. Beyond the appeal of loving more than we are fearing, of believing more than we are doubting, of knowing who we stand for and why — they will know that we are a community that struggles. But to not struggle alone, but together, in community. For our courage and conviction is strongest when we are in this together. Christ is in our very being – every one of us.

Every Easter we awake to a world, a challenging landscape to this story which has the power to change everything for all God's people. In 2021, the territory we cover is as profoundly unsettling as ever. We teeter on the edge of a world where it may soon be too late, too late to repent, and turn ourselves in the right direction — as a people and a planet. To us, in that vulnerable place of fear,

uncertainty, confusion — Jesus says those words. Look. Touch. Know that I am like you, human, and raised from the dead. Take on my courage and conviction. Be witnesses for me. Witnesses who make my love for this world visible, so that together we can make it tangible.

We are a community that is not held back by blinding fear or binding doubt. With humility, and love, our witness — we Presbyterians will preach the Good News at all times, and when necessary, use words. But my friends, God gives you the credibility and authority worthy of the Christ you follow. We can do more than door-dash some good news for our neighbors, and we can, my friends, go farther than yard signs. We can invite them to know us. To Look. To Touch. To see that we are human, just like them.

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