

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, April 17, 2016**

IN THE FACE OF DOUBT

Luke 24:13-35

I was lying in bed last night running over this sermon in my mind when it happened again, just as it has countless times before. On the eve of a Sunday a voice speaks to me. Now I don't know whether it's a demon perched on my shoulder or perhaps that of the old man, the old nature trying to regain some purchase in my soul. Whatever it is, it always comes with the same message: "You don't really believe that, do you? God? Really? As many times as you've looked up in the night sky and contemplated the enormity of the universe, that 13.8 billion light-year expanse, those 10 to the 24th power stars, those 170 billion galaxies, and you're really going to tell them that line, try to sell that line about a personal God who cares whether they live or die? Single individuals on one puny planet, in the midst of a universe that is unaware of their existence? You're really going to do that?"

Now I've heard that voice. Maybe you have, too. Not necessarily about preaching but about your everyday life and the witness that you have before the people that you know. I've heard that voice and that message more times than I care to think about in the course of the last almost 40 years. And whenever I do, I always, *always*, have recourse to the same response. It's a response as old as Job, given when some of his friends tried to sow doubt in his heart. "I know that my Redeemer lives!" And how do I know that? Well, let me show you how, by taking a look at the story of a journey to a small town that's found in Luke chapter 24. It takes place, of course, on the very first Easter. Two disciples encounter someone on the road. The resurrection, or at least the discovery of the empty tomb, takes place just before sunrise. The tomb had been discovered and the divine message had been received but these two disciples didn't get the message that Mary Magdalene had actually seen Jesus. As a matter of fact, what they heard was that, well, the women, they amazed us. They went to the tomb and they didn't find His body, but, you know, you really can't trust them. You really can't believe them when they say things. They're prone to hysteria and they get unbalanced at the slightest upset. You know, the Law was smart because it said you can't take the word of a woman. It has to be corroborated by a man and well, we heard what they said. They couldn't find the body and as far as it goes, the men who went afterwards found the tomb empty as well, but they also didn't see anything. So take that for what it's worth.

These two, Cleopas and most likely his wife Mary, were on their way to Emmaus. They were going to a village that was about seven miles from Jerusalem. It may have been their home or it may have been the home of relatives. For whatever reason, we are not told why they left Jerusalem, but they were on the way. On the way Jesus approached them, but they didn't recognize Him. Verse 16 says, "They were kept from recognizing Him." This was a deliberate plan on His part and God's part and the part of the Holy Spirit. It was an act of God for His purposes. And He asked them what they were talking about and Cleopas gets sarcastic, at least that's the way I hear it. Maybe you don't, but I

hear him being sarcastic when he says in verse 18, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?” How can you not? This has been the talk of the town. This has been the biggest news in the city and you don’t know what is going on? Didn’t you hear that Jesus, just a week ago, came into the city through the Golden Gate, came down the hill from the Mount of Olives and the people sang hallelujah and hosanna to the Son of David and the King of Israel? We thought there were big things happening. We thought that we were on the verge of the redemption of Israel. But as the week went on things deteriorated and our leaders did what leaders do when they feel threatened by what they don’t understand or by what they think threatens their power. So they sentenced Him to death and they turned Him over to the Romans to crucify Him, which they did. And there went our hope, dead as a door nail on Friday afternoon.

Now it’s the third day and we’ve heard this stuff and supposedly the tomb was empty but He’s still dead. We don’t know where His body is. Maybe it’s been taken somewhere. Maybe someone stole it. Who knows? But we had hoped, according to verse 21, that He was the One who was going to redeem Israel but we haven’t seen Him.

To which Jesus says, in verse 25, “How foolish are you and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken? Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into His glory?” Keep in mind that at this point they still don’t know who He is. So, as far as they know, this is simply some guy they met along the road who presumably, also, was a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, who then proceeds to question their intelligence and to question their faith and to ask, “Don’t you know? Aren’t you aware? Haven’t you been listening? The Messiah was supposed to die. He was supposed to suffer. Then He would enter into His glory.” I can imagine they probably listened to that and thought, “Okay, we’ve heard that before. Let us think about it. Jesus Himself had said some stuff like that but we certainly haven’t seen any evidence of it. All we saw was a man on a cross, the guy who was going to redeem us, dying right in front of us and then being buried behind a stone. That’s what we have seen.”

By opening up the Scriptures, what Jesus wanted to do was to get them out of the grief that they felt and the crashing of their hopes that also had been part of those days. And He wanted them to see that this has been anticipated. This didn’t happen by accident. This was not just an unfortunate turn of events. This was the plan all along. This is what God had planned, and planned long before, we’re told, at the beginning with Moses and all the prophets. So He went back over a thousand years to let them know this was what was in the cards. You think that God has failed, that things haven’t turned out the way you wanted them to, and that therefore, God is a failure. No, He tells them. God knows what goes before and what goes after. He knew that Jesus was going to die on that cross on Friday afternoon from all eternity. And He had a plan.

According to verse 27, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself. But presumably, even at this point, He is not saying, “This is about me, the guy who’s talking to you, the guy who’s opening the book. I’m the One that this

is talking about.” He doesn’t say that. He simply opens it up and lets the Scripture speak and yet still they do not get it until He opens their eyes.

He opens their eyes at a meal. They are approaching the village when, in verse 28, as they’re approaching Emmaus He acted like He was going on to whatever the next town or the next town was. And they say, “You know, it’s almost dark. It’s not safe to be out after dark.” In those days people simply did not travel after dark if it was not absolutely, positively necessary because of the threat of robbers. And so they said, “Since it’s getting dark, stay with us here. We’ve arrived. We’re where we intended to get to. So stay with us this evening and have a meal with us. Have dinner with us.”

So they come to the house and they’re at the table and an interesting thing happens. Keep in mind, they still don’t know who He is. They don’t know that this is their Lord and Master, their Teacher and Savior. They don’t know any of that. They just know that He’s this guy who they met along the road and that this guy was obviously, at the very least, a well-trained scholar in Judaism, undoubtedly Jewish Himself. He was a brother of sorts and so they invited Him in. Standard Middle-Eastern hospitality. They invited Him in to what we can presume is their home, since this is the place that they were going to. Or at the very least it was a home to which they had been invited.

Well, when He was at the table with them, *He* took bread and *He* gave thanks and broke it and began to give it to them. Now if you and I and Maryanne and a couple of other folks are just sitting around the dinner table and one of us says grace and we start passing things, nobody thinks anything of it. In those days, it would be expected that the head of the household in whose home the dinner was taking place would be the one who would give thanks. He would then begin the process of people being served. But here is the guest, the guy whose name has not been mentioned in the course of this story, just a stranger. *He* took break and *He* gave thanks. Now this is not communion, but one of the things that this story is about is the fact that when we do enjoy the sacrament together one of the things that happens there is we come and we meet Him in the breaking of bread. *He* invites us to the table. It’s not my table. It’s not Pastor Neil’s table. It’s not your table. It’s *His* table and He invites us and even as we give thanks over the bread it is He who is giving everything.

That’s something like what happened here at this table in this household. Not communion, but there’s no question Jesus, in a manner of speaking, takes over the normal role of the head of the household. And there’s a good reason for that. He *is* the Head of the household. These are His followers who are gathered together. He takes His natural place at the head of the table. And *He* gives thanks and *He* breaks bread and He gives it to them. And when He does, what happens? Verse 31, “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him and He disappeared from their sight.” Giving them the fright of their lives. I don’t doubt that their initial reaction was like something that we can’t even imagine. Picture it: Here they’ve been walking with this guy for who knows how long on the road. They have no idea who he is, just that they’re almost certain he’s a follower of Jesus. He certainly knows the Scriptures well enough and knows what they say about the Messiah. So they’re walking along, they don’t know who He is, they come

to the table, He gives them bread, and the first thing is that they recognize the Stranger. At the table, they see who it is who is the real host here. That's jolt number one.

Jolt number two, which follows almost immediately, instantly upon the first, is, "My Lord and My God! It's Him! The guy that we've been talking about all day and whose body has disappeared but who we assumed was dead, it's Him! He's alive!" And then He disappears and they get their third jolt because they realize, "You know, on Friday, this guy was mocked and told that if He wanted to demonstrate in fact that He was the King of Israel that He should climb down from the cross. He didn't do that. He just disappeared right before our eyes." It's the same guy. Something's changed. Yes, He who was dead is now alive and He who was the Man on the cross is now transformed. And truly what has happened is what Jesus says in verse 26 that He not only suffered these things, He then entered His glory.

I can imagine that these two people, and any other companions that were with them in the house there at the table, I can imagine that this quick succession of revelations resulted in the greatest misfiring of neurons in the history of the human race. They could not, I'm sure, believe what they were looking at. And then they realized it was true and they turned to each other, in verse 32, and said, "Were not our hearts burning in us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? Didn't we know?" They look at one another and they think back on the road and thought, "We knew all along something strange was going on." You ever turn to your spouse when something unusual happens, like your child gets his homework in on time or something weird happens and you say, "You know, I had a feeling. There was something odd going on. I couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't know what it was. But there was just something." They thought back and they realized that when He opened the Scriptures to them He was showing them Himself. He was showing them the One who was dead and is now alive.

They got up and they returned at once to Jerusalem, which was stunning in itself because it meant that they undertook what would have been at the very least a couple of hours' journey at night. And they found the eleven and those who were with them assembled together and what were the eleven and their companions saying? "Guess what? It's true. We've seen Him. He appeared to Simon." They may also have filled them in and said, "He also appeared to Mary Magdalene, which was completely incomprehensible to us, she being female, but He did." It would have taken them a while, I imagine, to work it out that it was a woman who was the first one to see Him alive. But they had multiple testimonies of it. And all those testimonies said the same thing: The Lord has risen!

And then they related their own story. At which point church started. Because that's what we do here, right? We tell one another our stories. We don't necessarily do it in the middle of worship, though I've done plenty of that and Pastor Neil's done a lot of that, Helen has done some of that when she's preached, as has Mike. Preachers do tell stories. But when we get together in Sunday school or small groups or just during the fellowship hour afterwards, we tell one another our stories. We tell one another the Lord has risen and I have seen Him. I have encountered Him. I have been changed by Him. We don't necessarily say it that way, but don't we witness to the truth when we say what the Lord

is doing in our lives? What He has done, what we hope that He will do in the future, what we expect that He will do? We tell those stories. And that's what these people do when they were together that Easter Sunday night. They told their stories. The eleven, Cleopas, his wife, and anybody else who was there. They had seen Him.

So what are the implications of this? Well, one implication obviously is that once we've had that encounter we'd best pass it along. It's not something we can hold in. It's not something that we can keep to ourselves. Every time I hear someone talk about "private faith," about personal faith that is nobody else's business, I wonder if it's real. I can't say whether it is or not. But I don't see any evidence of that kind of faith, if that's indeed what it is, in the New Testament. What I see is people who encounter the risen Christ and who cannot wait to tell others that something miraculous has happened. Something that flies in the face of that universe out there that tells us that even if there is a God or a divine spirit or the force or whatever, that it doesn't care about us, that it doesn't know if we live or die, that it is completely indifferent to us puny people on this puny planet, in this singular puny galaxy, that it doesn't care. When we encounter the risen Christ we find out that that is a lie. Because if Christ is risen He hasn't done it to do a parlor trick. And He hasn't done it to show off. And He hasn't done it for the fun of it. He has done it for you and me and all who will believe.

That's one implication. Here's the other implication and this is what I leave you with: That voice that I heard last night and that I've heard on so many different occasions telling me that the universe and God, if He is, doesn't care about me, you know what? I'm going to sleep better tonight. And I'm not going to hear that voice. It's a funny thing. I never do on Sunday evenings.