

April 18, 2021
Luke 24:36-48

Easter 3
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“Follow Jesus – Don’t ‘Like’ Him”

“... repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

I have a somewhat complicated relationship with Facebook. It allows me to stay in touch with friends and family who are far away, and often the cartoons that are posted can be quite hilarious; but Facebook can also be a source of frustration and aggravation. At times I am thankful that Facebook is in my life, and at other times I contemplate closing my account and getting as far away from it as possible (and I am definitely *not* interested in Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and all the rest!). One part of Facebook that I find especially curious is the “like” button: what does it mean to “like” someone’s post? Does it mean that we agree with what is being said, or join in a celebration, or merely acknowledge their existence? Do we feel as if we have accomplished something, or are a participant in the cause that is being espoused? What do we accomplish by clicking “like”?

Many churches and Christian organizations have Facebook pages (including our congregation), and social media is becoming an increasingly important part of the communications and outreach ministries of congregations (especially during the pandemic); but as I was scrolling through a few of the Facebook pages of congregations I have known a thought came to me: what if Facebook and other social media platforms were around during Jesus’ ministry? It is a question that was posed in *Jesus Christ Superstar*: “*If you’d come today you could have reached a whole nation; Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.*” Would Jesus have used Facebook to share his message? How would Jesus respond to people who would “like” his teachings? Would he be satisfied if people accepted his friend request and clicked “like,” or would he expect more of those who would be his “friends” or “followers”?

The people to whom the risen Lord appeared after his resurrection on Easter Day were not random groups of individuals; they were his disciples, the people who had accepted his invitation to discipleship, to “*follow me, and I will make you fish for people*” (Matthew 4:20). Following Jesus involved far more than a casual acknowledgment of his invitation or acceptance of his teaching; it meant leaving everything behind and physically following him in his travels. Following Jesus as a

disciple also meant following him in the path that led to the Cross: *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (Matthew 16:24). While many did accept this call to discipleship along with the cost that it required, others chose not to follow Jesus because of these sacrifices; when Jesus instructed a rich man to *“go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me,”* the rich man turned his back and walked away *“grieving, for he had many possessions”* (Mark 10:21-22). Many who had initially accepted the call to discipleship soon complained that *“this teaching is difficult; who can accept it? ... Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him”* (John 6:60, 66). But those who continued to follow Jesus shared Peter’s confession *“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God”* (6:68-69). Jesus’ call is clear: he is interested in gathering disciples who will walk in his path, not admirers who will stand on the sidelines “liking” his teachings.

- “[Jesus] never asks for admirers, worshippers, or adherents. No, he calls disciples. It is not adherents to a teaching but followers of a life Christ is looking for ... he could never be satisfied with adherents who accepted his teaching – especially with those who in their lives ignored it or let things take their usual course. His whole life on earth, from beginning to end, was destined solely to have followers and to make admirers impossible.” – Soren Kierkegaard.

Today’s Gospel lesson is a portion of Luke’s account of the Resurrection and the risen Christ’s appearance to his disciples. It follows the report of the two travellers who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus, *“and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread”* (24:35). It is while the disciples are talking about this appearance that *“Jesus himself stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”* (24:36). The report that Jesus “stood” among them echoes the language of Old Testament *angelophanies*, appearances of angels or heavenly beings:

- “The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him.” – Genesis 18:1-2.
- “The angel of the LORD was then standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. David looked up and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem.” – 1 Chronicles 21:15-16.

- “Then someone appeared before me, having the appearance of a man, and I heard a human voice by the Ulai, calling, ‘Gabriel, help this man understand this vision.’” – Daniel 8:15-16.

Similarly, Jesus’ greeting – *“Peace be with you”* – follows the pattern of Jesus’ instruction to those he sends out to speak peace to whatever house one enters (*“Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.”* – 10:5-6). As Jesus’ appearance and greeting follow a well-established pattern, so also do the disciples react in a manner typical of such appearances: *“they were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost”* (24:37). The women who encountered the empty tomb on Easter morning were also *“terrified, and bowed their faces to the ground”* (24:5). By thinking that the risen Lord was a spirit, the disciples may have either misunderstood the nature of the resurrection or thought that a spirit (not Jesus) was deceiving them. The complication sets up the need to clarify the nature of the resurrection and confirm its reality; so Jesus invites them to witness that it is truly he who has risen and is standing before them:

- “He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’” – 24:38-39).

Jesus’ question about their fear and doubt is like the response of unbelief elsewhere in Luke (*“When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’?”* – 5:22-23). His two proofs of his identity – his hands and feet, and eating in front of them – verify that he is not an apparition but that he has indeed risen from the dead. The risen Christ is the Jesus who died; this is the word that the Church proclaimed from the beginning of its witness to the Gospel, as is reflected in Paul’s writings:

- “... we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” – 1 Corinthians 1:23-24.
- “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!” – Galatians 3:1.

Jesus' appearance to his disciples with the scars of his crucifixion is a reminder that *"Easter is forever joined to Good Friday, and to follow the risen Christ is to follow the one who bore the cross."* (Fred Craddock).

The second part of the appearance of the risen Christ to the disciples serves to bring closure by recapping major themes of the Gospel and to set the stage for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the work of the disciples as witnesses. The fulfillment of Scripture is tied to the resurrection in the early proclamation of the Church (*"For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve."* – 1 Corinthians 15:3-5). The risen Lord reminds the disciples that *"these are my words spoken to you while I was still with you"* (24:44), a reference to his previous announcement to the twelve that *"we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets must be accomplished"* (18:31) and the report that on the road to Emmaus *"beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures"* (24:27). Luke has devoted his entire Gospel to this theme of fulfillment, *"an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us"* (1:1). Jesus' instruction stresses the continuity between the words of the risen Christ and the historical Jesus, and between Jesus and the Old Testament Scriptures, *"that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled"* (24:44). The Gospel is in continuity with what God has been doing and planning in the Old Testament; it is a reminder to the reader of the consistent faithfulness of God.

Jesus follows his announcement of the fulfillment of scripture by an act in which *"he opened their minds to understand the scriptures"* (24:45). The message of the Scriptures is not self-evident; one's mind must be opened to it, and they are rightly understood only in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. It will be the work of the apostles to continue this work of opening the minds of others to receive the blessings of God's Word; when Philip encounters an Ethiopian reading the prophet Isaiah and asks him *"do you understand what you are reading?"* the man replies, *"How can I, unless someone guides me?"* (Acts 8:30-31). Philip's apostolic ministry is possible because he was present when Jesus opened his mind to understand these same Scriptures when Jesus proclaimed that *"thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem"* (24:46-47). The phrase "it is written" is the equivalent of saying "it has been God's

plan all along.” Luke gathers under the authority of Scripture not only the death and resurrection of Jesus but also the mission to all nations, fulfilling the prophecy of Simeon that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation “*which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel*” (2:31-32). The specific content of this apostolic mission will be continuing the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins:

- “[John the Baptist] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” – 3:3.
- “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” – 4:18-19.
- “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” – 9:1-2.

Jesus’ announcement of the fulfillment of Scripture, opening the mind of the disciples to understand these Scriptures, and the necessity of proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations concludes with his announcement to the disciples that “*you are witnesses of these things*” (24:48). The concept of “witness” develops in the course of the New Testament writings from the role of an eyewitness, to one who can testify to the gospel, to one who dies for the sake of the gospel (*martys*, “martyr”). The disciples are called to witness to the truth of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the significance of this in the lives of all people. Their work as apostles (those who are “sent out”) will be to testify to the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ to all nations, which will be a major theme in the second volume of Luke’s writings, the Acts of the Apostles:

- “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” – 1:8.
- “And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” – 5:32.
- “We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem.” – 10:39.

There is a clear purpose to the risen Lord Jesus Christ’s appearance to the disciples; it is not for their own sake, or so that they might admire what had happened or affirm their own personal relationship with Jesus. Christ appears to them so that they might

understand the fullness of God's loving mercy for all people and might become witnesses to all that God has done for all people through the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus is not looking for admirers of his teaching in his appearance to his disciples; the risen Lord is calling disciples who will follow him in the way of the cross and apostles who will witness to his death and resurrection and what this means for all people.

- “If the Jesus who died belongs to the historical past but the one disciples now follow is the eternal Christ, then the Christian life can take on forms of spirituality that are without suffering for others, without the cross, without any engagement of issues of life in this world, all while expressing devotion to a living, spiritual Christ. The Gospels say no to such a definition of discipleship.” – Craddock.

We hear these words from our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ in this second Easter season that falls under that shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing restrictions on all aspects of our lives, including our life and ministry as a church. It has been a profound crisis that will shape our lives in ways we can not yet imagine; for the church, it has forced us to rethink many of the ways we have lived together in the past and the traditions that may no longer be relevant in the future. It is also calling us to recommit ourselves to Christ's calling to us when we were baptized: to “*let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*” (ELW Holy Baptism). It is a time in which we are called to reaffirm the promises we made at our Confirmation: “*to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth*” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). It is a time for us to realize that while the times in which we are live may be rapidly changing, our call as disciples of Christ remains the same: “*We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word*” (ELW Hymn 729).

- “What is required now is the kind of earnest and informed commitment to Jesus as the Christ that will be prepared as he was, through self-sacrifice, voluntary suffering, and informed, disciplined service, to *be* Christians in the midst of the world. If that kind of Christianity is *lived*, there can be no doubt about it – some, perhaps many, will ask for ‘the reason why.’ Then, and I think only then, usually, will it be appropriate and good for Christians to speak openly about their faith and ‘the hope that is in them.’” – Douglas John Hall.

There is nothing wrong with clicking “like” on a friend’s Facebook post; we may even click “like” on something that a church or Christian organization shares on their social media account. But being a Christian, living as a disciple of Christ and a child of the light, is not a matter of liking what Jesus says or admiring his teachings or the actions of his followers. The call of Christ to his followers – in the first and the 21st centuries – is the same: to be a witness to the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection in both word and deed. Being a Christian, being the Church of Jesus Christ, means that we are called to follow Jesus – not merely “like” him!

Amen.