

April 14, Luke 24:36-48, title: You are witnesses

April 23, Acts 8:26-40, Hope in the Wilderness

This chapter in the gospel of Luke has been a whirlwind. In the beginning of the chapter, the women discover the empty tomb. Then we are taken to the friends traveling to Emmaus who meet Jesus and have the Gospel revealed to them. Now we are back with the eleven when the risen lord appears to them.

The disciples were startled and frightened, but don't hold that against them too much. I, too, would be startled if the risen Lord appeared in the middle of the sanctuary. Immediately, however, they begin to doubt. Could it be a ghost? Here again, it was easier for them to accept the idea that Jesus was Casper the friendly ghost than to accept that he had risen bodily from the dead. Jesus treats them with great tenderness, though. He does not demand that they simply believe, he reasons with them. Come, see my hands and feet. See those holes, it's me. Feel my flesh, ghosts don't have flesh. Give me a little food and let me eat it, ghost don't eat. Then Jesus explains the scriptures to them, all the prophecies he fulfilled. He reasoned with them.

There seems to be a sense among non-believers these days that to be a Christian means you must check your brain at the door, store it on a dusty shelf with our Sunday hats. Christianity is thought to be for the superstitious, the science deniers, the people who don't think too deeply. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In Christianity there is a field of study called apologetics. Apologetics means to give an answer for our faith. It does not mean to go around saying I'm sorry for it. It is the field where theologians and apologists give reasoned answers for their faith. You might think that this field has little to do with science, but

actually, there is tremendous overlap and many great apologists are also scientists, philosophers, mathematicians, archaeologists, doctors and other brilliant minds. They have answered every challenge to our our faith over the past two thousand years, and the answer has never been blind faith. Surely, some answers are harder than others, but they are always reasoned.

Yet still so many believe their faith requires them to choose between reason and faith. Many Christians today do not know what they believe, as in the teachings of the faith, and why they believe that. That has led to a fracturing and division within the church and without.

But this was never Jesus' intention. Jesus reasoned with the apostles. They saw with their eyes what appeared to be the Lord resurrected but immediately their doubts, their reason, was challenged. Jesus chooses to reason with them. Here's the evidence showing that it is indeed me, Jesus. Here's the evidence that I am not a spirit. Jesus leads them through an intellectual exercise, reasons with them, until they know what they believe and why. He never asks them to check their brains at the door.

Further, Jesus opens the Scriptures to them. He shows how he fulfilled all of the prophecies of the Old Testament. This again was an appeal to their reason, and an appeal we still use to this day. Mathematicians have tried to calculate the odds of one man fulfilling all of the prophecies of the Old Testament. The most notable and enduring was a man named Peter Stoner who wrote a work called Science Speaks. He selected eight of the best known prophecies about the messiah and calculated the odds of one man meeting all of that criteria to be 1 in 10 to 17th power. To help us understand the magnitude of this number, Peter Stoner tells us to imagine covering the entire state of Texas knee deep with silver dollars. The entire state, and if you've ever driven through Texas, it's not a little state. Now imagine one, just one, of

these silver dollars we put a checkmark on. Now we take one person, blindfold them, and set them loose. The odds that the very first coin he selects is the marked one is the same as those eight prophecies being fulfilled in one life. Jesus fulfilled 108 prophecies by Stoner's reckoning, not eight. By the time we bump the number up to fulfilling 48 prophecies, the odds are the same as winning the lottery 22 times in a row. By the time we get to all 108, the number is almost meaninglessly high.

Sure, some of the prophecies Jesus could've tried to fulfill, like riding a donkey into Jerusalem, but many, if not most, were out of his control, such as place of birth, time, manner of death, and so on. This is the reason that Jesus uses to appeal to his apostles. He does not ask them to blindly believe that he fulfilled the Scriptures, he shows them.

And Jesus expects us to do the same. The Apostle Peter benefited from this reason, from this understanding that Jesus showed, and commands us to do the same. 1 Peter 3:15 tells us we are to "in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

Today, in the modern church, we fear doubt. But doubt in our faith journey is normal, natural. It is the mind attempting to make sense of something that we won't understand fully in this life. It leads us to question why we believe, and that questioning, that engagement with reason, can actually lead us into deeper faith, and a more solid foundation. Faith is a gift of God, but so is reason, and there are plenty arguments for our faith that engage with our reason and science.

One example of this is the writer and journalist Lee Strobel. Strobel rejected Christianity based on the suffering he saw in the

world and, as he admits, he led a rather immoral life that he enjoyed. As a journalist and legal editor for the Chicago Tribune he decided he would disprove Christianity. For two years he tried his hardest, meeting with experts and studying. By the end, he realized it would take more faith to be an atheist than a Christian and gave his life to Christ. He is the author of the renowned book *The Case for Christ*, among others.

Friends, hear the gentle words of Jesus, see how he appeals not just to faith, but to reason as well, and calls us to believe in him but also to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope we have in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Friends, I invite you to let your questions and even your doubts lead you into an ever-deepening faith.

Rev. Kate Mauch

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