**Easter and Beyond**

**Sunday May 6, 2018**

**“You are my Witnesses” (Luke 24:35-53)**

**1. Introduction: *Captain, my Captain***

Comedic actor, Robin Williams, created many memorable and funny characters throughout his career, but his best work can be seen in his more dramatic roles in the movies, *Good Will Hunting* and *The Dead Poet’s Society.* In the movie, *The Dead Poet’s Society,* Williams starred as Mr. Keating, a maverick English teacher who worked at a stuffy prep school in New England. He begins the school year by telling his students, “*Now in this class you can either call me Mr. Keating, or if you're slightly more daring, O Captain my Captain*.” Throughout the film Keating challenges his students to develop a mind of their own and not to be constrained by conventional ways of thought. His unconventional teaching methods encourage his students to break free from their fears. One student, whose overbearing father has already determined his life’s career, discovers his love for acting, his father forbids him to act. When the resulting conflict ends in a tragic death, the school’s administrators are eager to pin the blame on Professor Keating, so they coerce all of his students to sign a document that implicates him. The administrator’s plot succeeds and Keating is turfed out of the school.

At the film’s climax, Keating, fired from his job, returns to his classroom to clean out his desk. When he walks into the room, it is filled with an eerie silence because each student knows that they have betrayed him. Keating quietly cleans out his desk and leaves the classroom. For a brief moment, you think that the movie is going to end there. Life goes on and English class returns to its usual boredom. But the uneasy silence of the room is broken by the sound of a student, the most unlikely one, climbing upon his desk and shouting, “O Captain, my Captain.” Soon, a number of his classmates join in as the substitute teacher attempts to regain control over the class. Keating smiles and quietly says, “Thank you boys.” In the end these young students rose to the challenge of their teacher and thought for themselves. They were daring and called him *Captain.*

*The Dead Poet’s Society,* like many movies, can help us to understand key ideas from the Gospel story. In Luke 24, Jesus’ disciples were saddened, defeated and feeling guilty after the tragic departure of their beloved teacher. Jesus was a maverick and he challenged the religious authorities by breaking with convention. After being eliminated by the authorities, Jesus returned to his disciples and he shattered the silence of the room with his words and actions. But what will his disciples do and how will they respond?

**2. Christ’s Presence: *Peace be with You***

This morning’s Gospel lesson comes right after the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Emmaus Road disciples – a passage that we reflected upon on Easter Sunday. After the Emmaus Road disciples’ eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, they walked *all the way back to Jerusalem,* a journey of *eleven kilometers*. They did this because they were so excited and wanted to share the news that they had seen the Lord (24:33). Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, they heard fresh reports of Jesus sightings; people were saying, “The Lord is really risen! He has appeared to Peter!” (24:34). Eager to confirm these reports they “told their story of how Jesus had appeared to them as they were walking along the road, and how they had recognized him as he was breaking the bread” (24:35). As they were talking Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst (24:36). The disciples were understandably startled and frightened by this strange sight. They couldn’t believe that Jesus was actually standing among them; they thought they were seeing a ghost.

Jesus calmed the disciples’ fears and apprehensions as he did so many times before, by speaking words of *peace*. “Peace be with you,” he said to them (24:36). This was the traditional Jewish greeting, “Shalom” (םשָׁלוֹ). But in Luke’s Gospel is also signifies the *wholeness* that Jesus brings to people. Recall the angelic song from the Christmas story, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and *peace* on earth to all whom God favors” (Luke 2:14). Jesus, then, was reassuring his disciples by reminding them of the peace that he brings. As we discovered in John’s Gospel, it is a divine peace that only he can give (John 14:27). This God-given peace is grounded in a deep and loving relationship between God and his people. Amidst our challenges and our fears, Jesus says to all of us “*Peace* I leave with *you*; *my peace* I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

This, however, was not enough to dispel the disciples’ doubts and Jesus realized this and addressed their uncertainties. “Why are you *troubled*, and why do *doubts* rise in your minds?” he asked them (24:38). Knowing that they wondered if it was really him in the flesh, he beckoned them to observe his hands and his feet and see the wounds of the crucifixion (24:39). Not only did he show them his hands and feet, he invited them to touch them in order to verify his physical reality as the risen Jesus. “A ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones,” he said and then he showed them his hands and feet (24:39-40). What I love about these resurrection stories is that Jesus met people where they were at, *as he continues to do*. He didn’t scold the disciples for their unbelief or their failure to accept the reality of the resurrection. No, he showed them his hands and his feet and invites them to believe. Jesus operates the same way today, encountering people where they are at in their lives, addressing their fears and apprehensions, and inviting them to walk a little bit further down the road with him.

We need to remember that this is a journey, a process that moves in sometimes very small steps. Even with the risen Christ standing among them, the disciples “still did not believe it because of joy and amazement” (24:41). The combination of unbelief and joy is a bit strange to our ears because these two concepts are not usually joined together. Here, it means that the disciples disbelieved because of their joy and amazement. They were experiencing the joy that Jesus was alive, yet they didn’t fully believe that it was really true. In other words, it was *too good to be true.* Sensing their lingering doubts, he asked if they had any food around (24:41). It must have seemed like a strange request, but it shows the great lengths that Jesus went to in order to convince his friends that he was really there in the flesh. So they gave him a piece of broiled fish and he ate it right in front of their eyes (24:42-43). The risen Christ was there because ghosts do not eat food. Jesus was among them, sharing a meal with them as he had done on countless occasions. In the face of the disciples’ fears and doubts, Jesus patiently revealed himself to his disciples.

While Luke recorded this incident to argue for the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it also teaches us that Jesus meets us where we are at and addresses our fears and doubts. Certainly, we may not have the same fears and doubts as those first disciples, but we do have our share of challenges. Our fears, doubts, hesitations, and apprehensions can cripple our relationship with God and our mission in the world. I have to admit that I am sometimes filled with a fear of failure. As a congregation, a gathering of God’s people, we need to address our fears and hesitations if we are to serve God and our community. I believe that as we bring our fears before God, he meets us where we are at, addresses our fears and invites us to walk a little further down the road with him. Jesus says to us as a congregation, “Peace be with you.”

**3. Christ’s Work: *He Opened their Minds to Understand***

After Jesus ate the broiled fish, he explained to his disciples that the events of Good Friday and Easter fulfilled God’s plan of salvation as set out in the Old Testament or the Jewish Scriptures. In verse 45 we read that Jesus “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.” In doing this, he enabled his followers to have a fuller understanding of the Scriptures both *messianically* and *missionally.* In other words, he pointed to the ways in which Scripture spoke of his identity and purpose in the world and their continuing purpose in the world.

The action of Jesus in opening his disciples’ minds to understand the Scriptures forms a fitting conclusion to Luke’s Gospel. Leon Morris writes in his commentary, “The fulfillment of Scripture is a major theme of Luke’s. He sees God as setting out His purpose in those ancient writings and then bringing to pass what He has foreshadowed. He was not frustrated by the machinations of wicked men” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke,* p. 342). So when Jesus pointed to everything that was written about him in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings (the three-fold division of the Hebrew Bible) (24:44), he was simply not proof-texting his way through Scripture, but rather was “showing that the Old Testament a consistent divine purpose is worked out, a purpose that in the end meant and must mean the cross. The terribleness of sin is found throughout the Old Testament and so is the deep, deep love of God. In the end this combination made the cross inevitable” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke,* p. 339).

The disciples desperately needed this insight into Scripture because on several occasions in the Gospel they failed to understand what Jesus was saying. The most notorious examples are the *passion predictions* (9:22, 44; 17:25; 18:31-33; 22:37). These are instances prior to his final week in Jerusalem when he spoke openly to his disciples about the events of holy week. In these passion predictions Jesus tells his disciples that the Messiah will suffer and die at the hands of the authorities and rise from the dead on the third day. Even though Jesus warned them, they did not fully understand, which became evident in their reactions of panic, fear and despair in the story of the passion and resurrection. On Easter Sunday when the women came back from the tomb and announced that Jesus was alive, the disciples dismissed their report as “nonsense” and refused to believe (24:11). So at this crucial juncture in the Gospel, Jesus reminded them of the “words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you” (24:44). He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (24:45), stressing, “it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day” (24:46).

I find this Gospel story extremely encouraging because I know that I sometimes have a lack of insight into the words of Jesus. Like those first disciples, I can often miss the point and fail to hear Jesus speaking to me. What encourages me is that Christ still stands in our midst and he continues to open our minds to understand the Scriptures. His transforming presence takes our lack of insight and brings fuller understanding. Unlike those first disciples, we have the benefit of the Old and New Testaments, but even so we can still have limited insight into the things of God. The good news is that Jesus comes to each one of us, wherever we’re at, and opens our minds to understand the Scriptures. His voice in Scripture gives us insight into the magnificent richness of who he is: Saviour, Lord, Friend, Prophet, High Priest, Healer, King, and the list goes on. Yet in the midst of our noisy world, Jesus’ voice competes with a host of other voices. The question for all of us is this - whose voice will you and I listen to?

As a congregation our focus is on Scripture because we really do want to hear God’s voice and to know him better. Without an intimate knowledge of Christ, everything we do will lack eternal value. Comprehending the voice of Christ will transform this congregation as we make decisions, as we worship, as we break bread together, as we care for each other, and as we reach out to our world with words and deeds of love.

**4. Christ’s Commission: *You are Witnesses of All These Things***

Christ’s presence transforms us by opening our minds to a fuller understanding of him through Scripture. But there is more. As we become open to hearing his voice and understanding his mission, he gives us a purpose for our lives. Not only did the Scriptures speak of Jesus’ death and resurrection, they also affirmed, “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47). Jesus interpreted the Scriptures *missionally.* Christ’s death and resurrection was not merely a martyr’s death for a cause; his death and resurrection makes it possible for all who repent and believe to be forgiven. This, then, the message that Christ’s followers are entrusted with. The world was a courtroom and those disciples were *witnesses* who could testify to the truth of what they had seen and heard (24:48). They were *witnesses* of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, and now they were being sent into the world as proclaimers of his message of repentance and forgiveness.

The lesson for us is that as we seek to hear Christ’s voice and have deeper knowledge of him, we should also expect to be sent out with a mission. Now, this does not mean that we’ll all be going overseas as missionaries. Mission begins here; our Jerusalem is Toronto, but it also moves to the ends of the earth as God directs. So the mission of God is local but it is also global. Whether we are here or across the ocean, all Christians are *witnesses of these things.* All of us bear God’s message that in and through the cross of Christ, forgiveness is generously available to all who earnestly repent of their sin. In Christ, God has decisively dealt with the enmity that separated humanity from him. It is a message of God’s great love for humanity.

This may seem like an overwhelming task and I’m certain that those first disciples felt more than a little inadequate for the mission. But that’s the point, isn’t it? Once we begin to think that it’s all up to us and that we can accomplish God’s work in our own strength, we won’t get to far. Jesus knew that the task that he was calling his followers to do was beyond their capabilities, so he urged them to remain in Jerusalem and to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “I am sending what my Father promised to you, so stay here in the city until he arrives, until you’re equipped with power from on high” (24:49). As individuals and as a congregation, let’s rely on the power from on high, the Holy Spirit, to energize us for mission in our community and our world. I urge each one of you to pray for spiritual strength for the tasks before us. If you feel passionate about a ministry in our church, in the community or in the world, begin by seeking the empowerment of God’s Spirit.

The risen Christ stands among us, calling each one of us to take up his mission. How will we respond? If we’re daring, we say, *O Captain, my Captain.*