

From Wimps to Warriors
Luke 24:36-53

What could possibly explain such a transformation? At the beginning of this passage, we find the disciples cowering in fear in an upper room. Of course, given the events of the previous week, the arrest, scourging, and crucifixion of Jesus, they had good reason to be afraid.

For they were all followers of Jesus, and they were all Galileans, far from home. The people of the city all around them had cried out for Jesus' blood – they weren't likely to be friendly. If the disciples went to the temple, they would only meet the same religious leaders who had conspired against Christ. And they couldn't very well appeal to the Roman authorities – they were the ones who had crucified Jesus. No, Jerusalem was a dangerous, frightening place for these eleven remaining disciples.

And yet at the end of this passage we find the same men, no longer fearful but faithful. They stride confidently through the streets of Jerusalem in the midst of the mob. They walk right into the Temple compound itself praising God for all His marvelous deeds. And as they went on to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to Jerusalem and to the very ends of the earth, all of human history was turned upside down.

What could cause such a transformation? The most likely explanation is that the disciples had a personal encounter with the physically resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. Now, I know that many very educated people today scoff at the idea of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Superstition, they say. Pious legend, they say. Even some of the professors in the best known seminaries in this country object to such an unscientific notion.

But no matter how elegant or eloquent their objections may be expressed, there are some stubborn facts of history that none of these skeptics can explain. For the undeniable historical fact is that none of the 12 disciples was willing to die with Jesus on the day of His death. And the undeniable historical fact is that 10 of them chose to die and one of them chose to be exiled to a rock in the middle of the Mediterranean rather than to deny the fact of His resurrection. No one dies for something he knows to be a lie. So, there's just no way around it: Jesus must have walked out of the tomb.

But for a moment, let's pretend that all the so-called geniuses are right. Let's just grant for the sake of argument that Jesus never did physically rise from the dead. Let's say that the disciples just had some sort of vision of the spirit of Christ instead.

Well, what would you do if you saw a ghost, or even if you thought you had seen a ghost? You might scream or you might run away in fright. If the ghost kept showing up in your house, you might decide to move. What you probably wouldn't do is to say to yourself, "Wow. I think I'll

start a religion based on the idea that this ghost actually has a body, and I think I'll keep on telling people this even if they end up killing me in the process.”

No, the disciples were real people, just like us. In verse 37 they really thought they saw the ghost of Jesus, and they were really terrified. And all the erudite ruminations of skeptical scholars to the contrary, if seeing a ghost was the extent of the disciples' experience, then terror would have been the extent of their response. For remember: at the beginning of this passage they were afraid of the crowd, afraid of the Roman soldiers, and afraid of the chief priests. So if they had simply seen a ghost, well, they probably would have been afraid of that too. If they had simply seen a ghost, they would never have been transformed into the confident messengers of the risen Christ.

That's why Jesus goes to such lengths to prove to the disciples that He really was with them bodily as well as spiritually. That's why He asked them not only to look at Him but to touch Him, and to watch him eat something. Ghosts can't be touched. Ghosts don't eat. What they saw wasn't a ghost. It was Jesus, Who was really resurrected and Who really walked out of that tomb in a real physical body. The real fact of the physical resurrection of Jesus is the real basis, the real focus of the Christian faith. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a solid rock that no amount of skepticism has been able to shake.

But if the fact of Jesus' physical resurrection is foundational to our faith it is not sufficient for our faith. For it would have been very easy for the disciples to have marveled at the resurrection without being transformed. They needed something else to change them from cowering wimps to warriors of faith.

They needed the same thing the women needed when they had come to the tomb on that first Easter morning and found it empty. For if the women's initial reaction had been confusion, it was when they remembered the words of Jesus that they were filled with joy. In the same way, on Easter afternoon when the two men on the road to Emmaus saw the resurrected Christ, they didn't recognize Him at first. It was only after Jesus explained the prophecies about Him in the Old Testament, and after He broke the bread for them that their eyes were opened, and they rejoiced. Both the women at the tomb and the men on the road to Emmaus needed the Word of Christ to help them understand their experience of Christ.

Just so, Jesus didn't simply display the reality of His bodily resurrection to the disciples and leave it at that. No, He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures – to comprehend all the things that He had said to them during His earthly ministry, all the things that the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms had said about Him. It is this understanding of God's written Word as pointing to Jesus' identity as the risen Messiah that would form the principal content of their preaching. It was this new understanding of the Bible that they were unwilling to

give up, even on pain of death. Thus, it is only when we combine their experience of the resurrected Jesus with their new understanding of Scripture that we can explain why these wimps became warriors for Christ.

And the same combination is needed today, urgently needed. Oh, it may be obvious to us that those who deny the reality of Christ's bodily resurrection are just plain wrong. But there's a more insidious threat to the Church today. For there are many who would sacrifice the truth of Scripture in the name of their own personal experience of Christ. There are many who would exalt the Living Word of God – Christ – while denying the truth of the written Word of God – the Scriptures.

How else do you think so many who call themselves theologians can come to so many strange conclusions? How else do you think that so many who call themselves followers of Christ are willing to jettison what both the Old and New Testaments say so clearly about marriage and family issues? They simply claim that their reason or their personal experience, or the personal experience of their friends or family is simply more important than what the Bible says. They thus pit the Christ they claim to know personally against the Word of God that we all claim to believe.

But the way that Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples shows very clearly that we must avoid both of these errors. We must avoid the skepticism of those who doubt the resurrection and we must also avoid the error of exalting reason and experience over Scriptural truth. Instead, we must cling both to the Living Word, truly resurrected, and to the written Word, which bears inerrant witness of Him. Jesus didn't omit either form of truth, and neither should we. Both together form the foundation of the apostolic faith.

But we can't stop there. For there was a reason that Jesus revealed Himself in body and word to His disciples. He showed them His body and gave them His Word so that they would in turn bear witness of these things to others.

In other words, the foundation of the apostolic faith includes more than the historic facts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It also includes more than the fulfillment of thousands of years of prophecy. The foundation of the faith includes the spreading of that faith. The call to participate in God's mission to the world simply can't be separated from the rest of the good news.

And that should be obvious when we look at the transformation of the apostles' lives. For it wasn't just the reality of Jesus' resurrection and the understanding of how the Scriptures explained it all that made them bravely march back into the city of Jerusalem. No, if Jesus had only wanted them to know these things, they could have just gone back to Galilee and started fishing again.

But they didn't keep the glorious truth to themselves. Instead, it was their insistent and determined proclamation of the good news that got the disciples into so much trouble. It was their irrepressible desire to take the message of the gospel to the world that eventually got them killed for the sake of Christ.

But was all that really necessary? Well, look at how Jesus weaves all three parts of the foundation together in verses 46 and 47: thus it is written, Christ had to die and rise again, the good news should be proclaimed. All three are essential. None of the three can be omitted.

And if we take the content of the gospel at face value, that just makes sense, doesn't it? For if we indeed combine the certainty of the cross and the empty tomb with all that the Old and New Testaments say about those events, we can't escape their missionary impact.

For if Christ indeed died on the cross, that means He made a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. That's why repentance has to be a central focus of the gospel – unless we understand that we are sinners and unless we understand the devastating effects of sin, the cross won't make sense to us. But that's also why repentance needs to be preached to the whole world. For if the cross was necessary for any, it is necessary for all. And that means sinners all over the world need to repent or share a similar fate.

But at the same time if Christ indeed rose again from the grave, He indeed triumphed over the power of sin and death, not only for Himself but for all His people. That's why His resurrection is such good news for those who confess their sins and repent of them – the new, resurrected life Christ already has He promises to share with all those who trust in Him. The empty tomb thus means that there is a whole world full of people to whom the forgiveness of God is now available, if they will only repent and trust in Christ. But how can they believe without hearing the Word? And how can they hear the Word without a preacher?

In other words, the gospel is all bound up together. The cross and the empty tomb, the Scriptures, and the need to tell the story are all as interdependent as three legs on a stool. If any part is missing, none of the other parts make sense. If any part is missing we cannot explain the transformation of the apostles from wimps into warriors for Christ.

So, sure we know people are wrong to deny the empty tomb. Sure, we know people are wrong to deny the truth of Scripture. But are we any more ready than they are to take the gospel into the world? Are we any more willing than they are to make the proclamation of the good news our top priority? And if not, haven't we missed just as essential a part of the gospel as they have?

Jesus has gone away into heaven, and until He returns, the same work that was left for the apostles is left for us. If we would be warriors for Christ, we must believe and proclaim the whole gospel. To that end, let's pray that we would be filled with the power of God just as the apostles

were. And then let's tell the story with our time, our talents and our treasure, with our lips as well as with our lives, showing everyone we meet that Jesus has risen indeed, just as the Scripture says, and that He lives in our hearts.