

Luke 24:36b-48
April 26, '09

"JOYFUL DISBELIEF"

ONE OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ORDINATION AS A MINISTER OF WORD & SACRAMENT IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IS TO SUCCESSFULLY PASS WHAT ARE KNOWN AS *THE FOUR STANDARD ORDINATION EXAMS*.

THE EXAMS ARE IN THEOLOGY, WORSHIP, POLITY & BIBLICAL EXEGESIS.

IF A STUDENT FAILS ANY OF THE FOUR, HE OR SHE IS GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE THE EXAM AGAIN UNTIL PASSING IT & THE EXAMS ARE GIVEN TWICE A YEAR AT THE SAME TIME IN ALL PRESBYTERIAN SEMINARIES.

EACH STUDENT IS GIVEN AN INDIVIDUAL, PRIVATE NUMBER & WHEN EXAM RESULTS ARE IN, THEY ARE POSTED IN A PROMINENT PLACE TO GIVE EVERYONE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE HOW THEY FARED.

ACROSS FROM THE STUDENT'S SECRET NUMBER ARE LISTED THE FOUR EXAMS & EITHER A "P" OR AN "F" – PASS OR FAIL.

OF COURSE EVERYONE KNOWS WHEN THE RESULTS WILL BE POSTED & NEARLY EVERY STUDENT WHO TOOK THE EXAMS GATHERS AROUND IN ANTICIPATION.

I SAY "NEARLY" EVERY STUDENT BECAUSE I KNOW WHEN I TOOK THE ORDINATION EXAMS, I WAS ONE OF THE FEW "NO SHOWS."

I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW.

I DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW IF I WAS GOING TO HAVE TO TAKE ALL FOUR ORDINATION EXAMS OVER.

AS YOU MIGHT IMAGINE, THE SECRET NUMBER DOESN'T REMAIN A SECRET VERY LONG!

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG FOR EVERY STUDENT ON CAMPUS TO KNOW HOW EVERYONE ELSE DID ON THE ORDINATION EXAMS.

WHEN I DIDN'T SHOW UP FOR THE POSTING, A GROUP OF FRIENDS CAME LOOKING FOR ME TO TELL ME THAT ONLY ONE STUDENT HAD PASSED ALL 4 EXAMS ON THEIR FIRST ATTEMPT & BY THE PROCESS OF ELIMINATION, THEY WERE AFRAID THAT I WAS THE ONE.

NOW, I SAY THEY WERE AFRAID THAT I WAS THE ONE BECAUSE TO VIRTUALLY ANYONE ON CAMPUS – STUDENTS, FACULTY, ADMINISTRATION – I WOULD HAVE BEEN THE ONE STUDENT LEAST LIKELY TO HAVE DONE SO.

IT WAS ABSOLUTELY INCONCEIVABLE TO MY FELLOW STUDENTS THAT I COULD POSSIBLY HAVE FARED BETTER THAN THEY DID ON THE EXAMS.

NOW, WHEN I TELL YOU THAT, I DO SO WITHOUT A SHRED OF FALSE MODESTY, BECAUSE IT WAS THE ABSOLUTE TRUTH.

IF A POLL HAD BEEN TAKEN TO GUESS THE ONE CANDIDATE MOST LIKELY TO *FAIL* ALL FOUR EXAMS, I WOULD MOST ASSUREDLY HAVE BEEN THE ODDS-ON FAVORITE.

I WENT HURRIEDLY TO THE POSTING PLACE WITH MY NUMBER IN HAND, NOT TRUSTING MY MEMORY TO HAVE IT CORRECTLY IMBEDDED IN MY MIND.

I GAZED DOWN AT THE SHEET AND, SURE ENOUGH, MY NUMBER ON THE LEFT SIDE OF THE PAGE CORRESPONDED WITH 4 “P’S” TO THE RIGHT OF IT.

I WENT TO THE DEAN’S OFFICE – QUITE CERTAIN THAT I HAD INADVERTANTLY BEEN GIVEN THE WRONG NUMBER.

JUDGING FROM THE TIME HE TOOK ANALYZING HIS INFORMATION, THAT WAS CLEARLY HIS CONCLUSION AS WELL.

FINALLY, HE SHOOK HIS HEAD IN DISBELIEF & SAID, *“THAT’S YOUR NUMBER ALL RIGHT, DENNIS. AND THE INFORMATION IS ACCURATE. IT LOOKS LIKE YOU PASSED THEM ALL.”*

TO SAY THAT I EXPERIENCED “JOYFUL DISBELIEF” WITH THAT BIT OF NEWS WOULD BE A VAST UNDERSTATEMENT.

I WOULD HAVE BEEN SATISFIED IF I’D PASSED *ONE* OF THE EXAMS THE FIRST TIME.

TO HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE NEWS THAT I PASSED ALL FOUR LEFT ME WITH A JOY BEYOND BELIEF.

I THINK WE’VE ALL HAD SUCH EXPERIENCES.

SOME OF THOSE EXPERIENCES ARE FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN THAT ONE.

WHEN THE TEST RESULTS FROM THE DOCTOR COME BACK NEGATIVE WHEN EVERYTHING POINTED TO THAT OUTCOME AS HIGHLY UNLIKELY, YOU’RE LEFT IN “JOYFUL DISBELIEF.”

WHEN THE RELATIONSHIP YOU THOUGHT WAS OVER TAKES A 180-DEGREE TURN & ENDS UP BETTER THAN IT EVER WAS, YOU EXPERIENCE “JOYFUL DISBELIEF.”

WHEN THE BOSS CALLS YOU TO THE OFFICE & YOU’RE SURE IT’S TO REPRIMAND OR EVEN TERMINATE YOU, AND INSTEAD YOU’RE OFFERED A PLUM PROMOTION, YOU FIND YOURSELF IN “JOYFUL DISBELIEF.”

YES, WE ALL KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE TO EXPERIENCE “JOYFUL DISBELIEF” IN LIFE.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT ALL OF THESE EXAMPLES – NO MATTER HOW IMPORTANT THEY MAY SEEM – ARE DWARFED BY THE “JOYFUL DISBELIEF” OF THE DISCIPLES ON THE NIGHT OF THE RESURRECTION.

THAT’S WHEN THIS EVENT IN LUKE’S GOSPEL TAKES PLACE.

IT IS STILL EASTER DAY.

WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE TOP OF YOUR BULLETIN, YOU SEE THAT WORD “EASTER” IS STILL THERE.

WHEN WE SING HYMNS LIKE “THE DAY OF RESURRECTION,” “IN THE GARDEN,” AND “HE LIVES,”
YOU GET THE FEELING THAT EASTER ISN’T YET OVER.

IT ISN’T.

THIS IS – AS YOUR BULLETIN SAYS – “THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER.”

WE HAVE 4 MORE TO GO – THE 4TH, 5TH, 6TH & 7TH SUNDAYS OF EASTER WILL TAKE US TO THE END
OF MAY & OUR OBSERVANCE OF PENTECOST.

EASTER ISN’T A DAY.

IT IS A SEASON.

IT’S NOT JUST A SEASON OF THE YEAR.

IT IS A SEASON OF LIFE.

HOPEFULLY, FOR YOU, IT’S A SEASON THAT LASTS YOUR *ENTIRE* LIFE.

NOW THE PROBLEM IN COMPARING WHAT THE DISCIPLES EXPERIENCED WITH JESUS ON THE
NIGHT OF THE RESURRECTION WITH SOME OF OUR OWN EXPERIENCES OF “JOYFUL DISBELIEF” IS THAT
SUCH COMPARISONS ARE SADLY LACKING.

NO MATTER HOW IMPORTANT THE NEWS IS THAT LEAVES YOU IN “JOYFUL DISBELIEF,” IT IS
VIRTUALLY NOTHING WHEN PLACED AGAINST THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DISCIPLES THAT NIGHT.

REMEMBER WHAT PAUL SAID IN HIS LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS: “... *WHATEVER GAINS I HAD,
THESE I HAVE COME TO REGARD AS LOSS BECAUSE OF CHRIST. MORE THAN THAT, I REGARD EVERYTHING AS
LOSS BECAUSE OF THE SURPASSING VALUE OF KNOWING CHRIST JESUS MY LORD. FOR HIS SAKE, I HAVE
SUFFERED THE LOSS OF ALL THINGS, AND I REGARD THEM AS RUBBISH, IN ORDER THAT I MAY GAIN
CHRIST...*”

COMPARED TO THE NEWS THE DISCIPLES RECEIVED THAT NIGHT, EVERYTHING ELSE CAN BE
CONSIDERED LITTLE MORE THAN RUBBISH!

EUGENE PETERSON, IN HIS WONDERFULLY COLORFUL TRANSLATION OF THESE SAME VERSES,
HAS PAUL SAYING, “*YES, ALL THE THINGS I ONCE THOUGHT WERE SO IMPORTANT ARE GONE FROM MY LIFE.
COMPARED TO THE HIGH PRIVILEGE OF KNOWING CHRIST JESUS AS MY MASTER, FIRS^THAND, EVERYTHING I
ONCE THOUGHT I HAD GOING FOR ME IS INSIGNIFICANT – DOG DUNG. I’VE DUMPED IT ALL IN THE TRASH SO
THAT I COULD EMBRACE CHRIST & BE EMBRACED BY HIM.*”

EVERYTHING ELSE IN LIFE IS, BY COMPARISON TO WHAT THE DISCIPLES EXPERIENCED,
INSIGNIFICANT!

ONE REASON FOR THAT IS THAT WE ALL KNOW THAT FOR EVERY EXPERIENCE OF “JOYFUL
DISBELIEF,” THERE IS THE CORRESPONDING OPPOSITE.

YOU LOOK AT THE EXAM CHART & YOU FAILED THEM ALL.

YOU GO IN FOR A ROUTINE CHECK-UP & THE DOCTOR DISCOVERS A LIFE-THREATENING
ILLNESS.

FROM OUT OF THE BLUE, YOU'RE GIVEN NEWS THAT A LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP – A DEEP FRIENDSHIP OR EVEN MARRIAGE – IS OVER.

YOU'RE FLYING HIGH AT WORK – FLOATING ALONG, THINKING EVERYTHING'S GREAT – AND SUDDENLY, WITHOUT WARNING, YOU'RE TOLD YOU'RE POSITION IS BEING TERMINATED.

NOT ONLY DO WE KNOW THE FEELING OF “JOYFUL DISBELIEF,” BUT WE KNOW ITS OPPOSITE AS WELL.

THAT'S WHY THIS NEWS THE DISCIPLES RECEIVED ON THE NIGHT OF THE RESURRECTION FAR SURPASSES EVERY OTHER EXPERIENCE IN LIFE.

THE NEWS THEY RECEIVED ISN'T CONFINED TO THEM.

THIS “JOYFUL DISBELIEF” IS AVAILABLE TO EVERY ONE OF US HERE THIS MORNING.

IT'S THE EASTER MESSAGE & IT'S NOT JUST FOR A DAY.

IT'S NOT JUST FOR A SEASON.

IT'S A MESSAGE FOR LIFE.

THE LEGENDARY PREACHER, DR. R.W. DALE, PASTOR FOR 36 YEARS IN BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND, TESTIFIED TO THE REALITY OF THIS EXPERIENCE.

ONE DAY WHILE SITTING AT HIS DESK WRITING AN EASTER SERMON, SUDDENLY THE THOUGHT CAME OVER HIM WITH OVERWHELMING CLARITY.

"CHRIST IS ALIVE! ALIVE! ALIVE! CAN THAT REALLY BE TRUE? LIVING AS I AM?"

DALE SAID, "AT FIRST IT SEEMED STRANGE, BUT AT LAST THE TRUTH DAWNED IN A BURST OF GLORY. I ROSE AND PACED ABOUT MY STUDY REPEATING 'CHRIST IS LIVING! CHRIST IS LIVING! YES, CHRIST IS LIVING!'

DALE SAID THAT EXPERIENCE HAD THE NATURE OF A NEW DISCOVERY.

"I THOUGHT THAT ALL ALONG I BELIEVED IT, BUT NOT UNTIL THAT MOMENT DID I FEEL SURE ABOUT IT."

HE SAID TO HIMSELF: *"ALL MY PEOPLE SHALL KNOW IT. I SHALL PREACH IT AGAIN AND AGAIN UNTIL THEY BELIEVE IT AS I DO NOW."*

THIS PASSAGE IN LUKE IS ONE OF THOSE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF JESUS THAT SEEMS TO RAISE MORE QUESTIONS THAN IT ANSWERS.

THE DISCIPLES WERE TERRIFIED.

THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE SEEING A GHOST.

BUT HERE – AS MUCH AS ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE GOSPELS – JESUS ASSURES THEM THAT HE'S REALLY THERE – LITERALLY “IN THE FLESH.”

HE INVITES THEM (LIKE HE DID THOMAS A WEEK LATER) TO TOUCH HIS HANDS & HIS FEET – TO SEE THE VERY PLACES THAT HAD BEEN RUN THROUGH WITH NAILS.

AND THEN HE ASKS A VERY LOGICAL & ORDINARY QUESTION – “HEY, YOU GUYS GOT SOMETHING TO EAT? I’M STARVED!”

AND BEFORE THEIR VERY EYES, HE TAKES A PIECE OF FISH & EATS IT!

GHOSTS DON’T EAT FISH!

THIS IS REALLY JESUS & HE’S VERY MUCH ALIVE!

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT?

DO YOU BELIEVE LUKE IS TELLING US THE TRUTH IN THESE WORDS?

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT JESUS WAS, IN FACT, RAISED FROM THE DEAD?

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT HE SAID, “REPENTANCE & FORGIVENESS OF SINS IS TO BE PROCLAIMED IN HIS NAME TO ALL NATIONS?”

IF YOU *DON’T*, I HAVE TO WONDER WHY YOU’RE HERE TODAY – OR ANY SUNDAY.

AND IF YOU DO –

- IF YOU BELIEVE THAT JESUS WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD –

- IF YOU BELIEVE THAT FORGIVENESS IS AVAILABLE THROUGH REPENTANCE & TRUST IN HIM –

IF YOU BELIEVE, LIKE R. W. DALE, THAT JESUS IS ALIVE TODAY –

- IF YOU BELIEVE THESE THINGS, HOW CAN YOU *NOT*, AS THE DISCIPLES EVENTUALLY DID –

- PUT ASIDE YOUR DISBELIEF & LIVE JOYFULLY IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT NO MATTER WHAT

STANDS BEFORE YOU, THE GOOD NEWS OF RESURRECTION SUPERSEDES EVERYTHING ELSE IN LIFE.

AMEN.

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