

Third Sunday of Easter, Gospel Year B

PRESENCE MATTERS

Luke 24:36b-48

Third Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

36b Jesus himself stood among [the disciples] and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38 He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 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." 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things."

DIAGNOSIS: Absence



Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Absence of Jesus

The reader gets the picture of the disciples sitting around and talking about what they have heard: the report of Jesus' resurrection, and the witness from those on the Emmaus Road. The problem remains. Jesus, who was very present and at the center of their lives, is absent.

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem) Absence of Trust

On numerous occasions Jesus told them it was necessary for him to suffer and die. He promised them he would rise from the grave. They heard the report of the witnesses. So far, the reports and the promises have resulted not in faith and action, but only in sitting in a circle and talking.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Deus Absconditus

The term *deus absconditus* is generally used to speak of the hidden God. (Isaiah 45:15 says, “Truly, you are a God who hides himself.”) “Abscond,” the common English word derived from the Latin, means something different. It means “to run away with something of value.” Jesus has absconded with the very presence of God.

PROGNOSIS: Presence



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Deus Revelatus

God persists in revealing himself in Jesus. In one expression of the church, the preacher often says, “Can I get a witness?” The preacher is not asking for someone in the congregation to stand up and testify to her faith. Rather the preacher launches into the witness of scripture. He reminds those listening that Jesus fulfilled all that was written about him in the law, the

prophets, and the writings. He told the disciples he would suffer, die, and rise. And here Jesus stands before them. He puts the fear of God into them. They recognize him by his wounds. He eats with them as he offered himself in food and drink on the night of his betrayal. He commissions them to carry on the revelation of God, proclaiming repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting the Promise

We voice our trust in Christ's promise, and our own commissioning when we confess, "I believe in the holy catholic Church." We make this confession as a corollary to our belief in the Holy Spirit, who, in the words of the Small Catechism, "calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Redeeming Presence

Continuing the words of the Catechism, "Daily in the Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers." In doing so, Jesus redeems our lives to function as a part of God's redeemed, new creation.

God uses earthly and palpable means to do this mighty work. Water, bread, and wine may only be down payments on the fulfillment of God's promises. But they are at least that. They are God's presence and blessing on our heads, pressed in our hands, and consumed in our mouths. Human hands administer these means of grace. The Holy Spirit does this mighty work through frail flesh, such as our own. Luther said that when the preacher proclaims the gospel, then Christ himself walks among us. When we speak and live the gospel, Christ is present.

Someone in the Crossings community might ask, "Can you give me

an example of what this looks like in our daily lives?" The preacher in that other tradition, to which I referred above, will answer, "I'm glad you asked."

In my farewell sermon to a congregation, I glossed over the pain of our leave-taking. In some fit of gnostic inspiration, I downplayed the importance of our physical presence with one another. A few years into my new call, one of our family members was diagnosed with a brain tumor. It was benign, but was buried deep in the brain. The surgeon promised to do her best. It was a long summer. Two more surgeries followed. Families from my former congregation travelled hundreds of miles to get to us. Parents of high school friends made the trip. A friend moved in with us to help. Members of the congregation fed us for three months.

Sometime later I went back to preach at my former congregation. I reminded them of my farewell sermon. I said, "I am here today to tell you I was wrong. Presence matters."

Presence matters because it carries to us the promise of the risen Christ, a presence redeeming even the most terrifying spans of our lives, and functions as a part of God's redeemed and new creation.