

Luke 24:36-48: What you see is entirely different from what you know.

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Two disciples walk the road to Emmaus, three days after Jesus died. A stranger approaches and asks why they're so sad. They can't believe he hasn't heard about the awful public death of their teacher and friend Jesus. The disciples tell the stranger that some women from their group also brought the bizarre news that Jesus' tomb is now empty and angelic messengers said that Jesus is *alive*.

The stranger lights up and starts making all kinds of connections between scriptures, talking about how the messiah would suffer and die and also be raised from death.

Approaching Emmaus, the disciples invite this stranger to their home for dinner. He accepts, and when he breaks a loaf of bread they recognize Jesus himself. That same moment he's gone. Astonished, they race seven miles back to Jerusalem and tell all the other disciples what they experienced.

Right there is where we pick up today's reading. Listen for God's word to us from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24 (NRSV):

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

³⁸He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look 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." ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴Then 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." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "So it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.

Someone's Eating the Sun. My spouse Aimee has kept from childhood a book with that title. It's about barnyard animals freaking out because the sun seems to be disappearing. You might have shouted the same thing this past Monday when for a few minutes our local star was fully eclipsed by our moon. (The animals in the book end up getting educated about eclipses by a wise turtle, to everyone's relief.)

Four thousand years ago an eclipse startled the Chinese, who perceived that a heavenly dragon was eating the sun. They ran into the streets and shouted and banged drums and

pots to scare the dragon away. It worked.¹ In the year 840 Emperor Louis of Bavaria experienced an eclipse and died of fright.² Closer to our time, John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*:

As when the Sun...
In dim eclipse, disastrous twilight sheds
On half the nations and with fear of change
Perplexes monarchs³

Total eclipses are rare and unnerving celestial events. For millennia they incited fear and confusion. Annie Dillard's amazing essay about experiencing a total eclipse describes the bizarre silvery light when a lens cap snaps onto the sun. Our everyday sun-comforted world disappears, unlocking mysteries both outward and inward. Dillard says, "What you see in a total eclipse is entirely different from what you know."⁴

They were terrified. Thought they were seeing a ghost. The disciples from Emmaus are trying to put into words their bizarre experience of Jesus *alive* when suddenly *he appears* in the room with everyone and says "Peace be with you." But nobody's ready for peace. They're shocked. Terrified. Confused. Questions and joy swirl their hearts. In one pastor's words, "They disbelieved [with] joy."⁵ It cannot be Jesus. Yet here he is!

What you see in resurrected Jesus is entirely different from what you know. The risen Jesus gives his friends a moment to catch up. He meets them right where they are, in their terrified disbelieving joy.

Come on, I'm not a ghost. Look at my hands and feet. Go ahead, don't be shy, touch me. You ever seen a ghost who looks like this? Didn't think so. Anybody here got something to eat? I'll take that piece of broiled fish.⁶

Many of us are not convinced of things by somebody trotting out a watertight argument. Often what changes us is personal experience. So Jesus offers his friends his real presence, which is both like and unlike the Jesus they have known. He welcomes their questions, their touch, their disbelief.

Maybe a ghost or a hallucination would be easier to accept than someone resurrected. Yet a ghost wouldn't have flesh and bone. So picture the disciples, minds blown and hearts hoping, tentatively reaching out to touch Jesus' arm. His transformed body shows the marks of his death, yet he breathes and lives and eats.

I love that he asks them for a snack. Maybe it helps them believe he's alive. Also he hasn't had a proper meal in three days! Table hospitality has marked Jesus' whole ministry. Like

¹ "Eclipse 101." Nasa Total Eclipse 2017 website: <https://eclipse2017.nasa.gov/eclipse-history>

² Cited by Annie Dillard, quoted here: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/08/01/annie-dillard-total-solar-eclipse>

³ "Eclipse 101." <https://eclipse2017.nasa.gov/eclipse-history>

⁴ Annie Dillard, as curated by Maria Popova: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/08/01/annie-dillard-total-solar-eclipse>

⁵ Paynter, Roger A. "Luke 24:13-49: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014. p. 353.

⁶ Long, Thomas. "Luke 24:36b-48: Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World." *Connections: Year B, Volume 2*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020. p. 232.

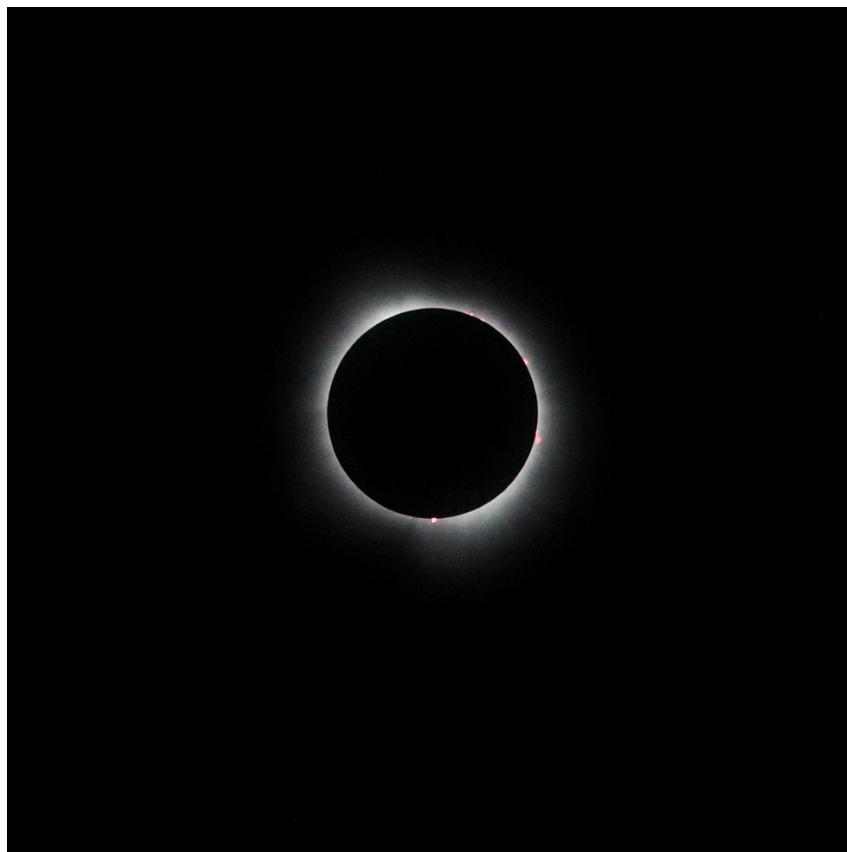
the time he shared five loaves and two fishes with a hungry crowd of thousands. At Emmaus those two disciples recognized him in the breaking of the bread. In John's gospel resurrected Jesus eats breakfast on the beach with his friends.

Here's one more connection. The night before his death, Jesus had shared a Passover meal with his disciples, and he vowed that he wouldn't eat a Passover meal again until God's reign comes. So about resurrected Jesus eating this piece of fish, Bible professor Sharon Ringe says: "Although this is not a formal Passover meal, it still falls in Passover week and the setting is the same — with the disciples in Jerusalem: *Perhaps that means God's reign has dawned.*"⁷

Jesus resurrected reveals that God is doing something new in the world. Life beyond death stands visibly, tangibly among the disciples. Jesus also takes his friends beyond the tangible as he opens their minds to understand God's lifegiving work as proclaimed through the scriptures.

On Monday Aimee and I joined dozens of people gathered in a meadow in Indianapolis, in the path of totality for the eclipse. As the moon took an hour to slide right between us and the sun, the daylight grew faint and metallic. Shadows changed shape and danced weirdly. The air cooled and birds quieted and insects swarmed. People looked up more and more often as the sun shrank to the tiniest sliver.

Then the moon fully snapped over the sun, leaving only a thin glow around the edge.



⁷ Ringe, Sharon. *Luke*. p. 289. My emphasis.

Instant night at 3:00pm. We all took off the eclipse glasses and our bare eyes stared into the heart of the solar system for almost four minutes. Silence. Awe. Unknowing. A young friend spontaneously sobbed in fear, though several times that day she had read *Someone's Eating the Sun*. An adult asked softly, "So what day is it now?"

Everyone in that meadow faced a reality entirely different from what we know. Even if you grasp rationally the orbital mechanics that make a total eclipse possible, living through it transforms you because it's just alien. Startling. Humbling. And joyful! After the initial shock, we started hearing people's cries of astonishment and delight. I found myself spontaneously whooping and jumping. We disbelieved with joy.

In my lifetime I've experienced over 20,000 days and nights. For most of you older than toddlers, your number will be somewhere in the thousands as well. We have so much built-up knowledge of sunrises and sunsets in all sorts of weather, knowledge of moon phases cycling through the night sky.

And in my whole life, for only a handful of minutes have I experienced the sun reduced to a softly glowing filament behind the black moon. It's nearly impossible to integrate that experience with everything else that I know of life on earth.

But being hard to take in doesn't make a total eclipse any less real.

Being hard to take in doesn't make Jesus' resurrection any less real.

And even if we grasp theoretically that the God of all creation has power to bring resurrection out of death, encountering that reality can't help but transform us because it's so alien.

A few evenings ago Bruce Reyes-Chow was here at Highland to do a reading from his new book, *Everything Good About God is True*. Bruce is one of our more famous Presbyterians. He's a pastor, church planter, activist for justice, writer, speaker, and for a couple years served as moderator of our denomination.

The other night one of our members asked Bruce, in light of the world's brutal realities, about the strikingly hopeful nature of his writing. Bruce responded that as people shaped by this story, by Christ's resurrection, how could we not live hopeful lives?

Bruce writes about this in his book, too, connecting resurrection and hope:

Let me start by saying that I believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. Betcha didn't see that coming! I mean, I've been sounding like a thoughtful person, and now I'm admitting that a dead body can come back to life? Exactly.

It is important...to understand this: I believe in the bodily resurrection not because of science or empirical evidence but *because* it is an outrageous and disruptive claim. It is an event beyond my imagination and my human comprehension, and, if true, it turns upside-down my assumptions about the future of the world. But it's that very

fact — that it transcends everything I assume to be true or possible about how the world works — that gives me hope.

Working in concert, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus talk back to so many indicators that suggest that death and destruction will have the last word, that the world is destined to crumble. The bodily resurrection of Christ gives me hope that, through the power of God, the world can become better. I choose to believe that the world will know healing beyond what I as a mere human can comprehend.⁸

Every day you and I collect endless evidence of entropy, of loss, of grief, of death. What we see in resurrected Jesus is entirely different from what we know.

With Jesus' disciples we are freed to believe in hope, or even to disbelieve with joy. Because God's outrageous good news is bigger and better and more real than we can fully comprehend.

Christ's resurrection gives us hope that, through the power of God, the world can become better, can be healed. As the risen Lord's disciples in this time and place, as readers and hearers of this good news, you and I are witnesses of these things.

In the name of God the Light,
Christ the Lens,
and the Illuminating Spirit.

⁸ Reyes-Chow, Bruce. *Everything Good About God is True*. Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024. p. 112-113.