

Psalm 4  
Luke 24:36-48  
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## RESURRECTION, CATS, AND DOOR SPRINGS

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."  
They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them,  
"Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 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." Luke 24:36-39

You're familiar, I'm sure, with the term postmodernism. It crops up everywhere to define our age, the age *after* Modernism. Modernism was that movement which hitched itself to insights found in, e.g. Darwin's *Origin of Species* in the 1860's, ushering an age of confidence that, eventually, the world (including religion) would give up its secrets to the force of human intellect. But for all our exponential massing of information the anticipated final answers gave way instead to widening mystery and deep uncertainty, like Alice falling down the rabbit hole and discovering a world that was becoming instead, in Lewis Carroll's apt phrase, "curioser and curioser." Carroll, a brilliant Oxford mathematician, in fact wrote the book as a parody of this emerging strangeness. Ironically, it was published just six years after Darwin's *Origin*. Confidence and mystery in everlasting partnership.

Jesus' resurrection shares that uneasy partnership of confidence and mystery. Luke understands only too well that mystery is an affront to reason. Even the disciples are appalled when the risen Christ stands in their midst, inviting them to touch him, while they suspect that he's imagination's art—a ghost. His first words to the terrified disciples, "Peace be with you," would likely have been as calming as a benediction in fire-choked stairwell. So he showed them his hands and feet. He invited them to touch him, and he asked, as though he'd come from a long journey, if they had anything for him to eat. This is not an appeal to faith. It's an appeal to confidence, to reason, to heady experience of a tangible reality—"Touch me!"

Luke knows full well, however, that this is only part of the resurrection's claim. So in the preceding story he has Jesus appearing suddenly on the road to Emmaus where he joins two forlorn disciples. They have absolutely no clue who he is. They talk for miles, and as the day wanes they invite him to an inn with them. He sits at table, and when he breaks bread, in a flash of sacramental recognition they know him—and he vanishes! This represents the core of faith. Faith that takes hold of airy nothingness when the atoms and corpuscles, bone and sinew and calloused hands are no more tangible than memory. Luke understands that the power of the resurrection needs both stories,

especially for the church whose people only have the received memory. Or do they?

I'm not particularly fond of cats. (That's called British understatement, by the way.) We have two of them in our household. One weighs about the same as a small Shetland pony. She hurls herself at the bedroom door like a battering ram at 3 a.m., determined to be let in. And like two people conditioned by their pets through negative reinforcement, we oblige. If we don't lift her on the bed she causes mayhem until we do. And when she jumps down two hours later, it registers noticeably on the Richter Scale. The other is a barn cat, a feisty critter that reminds me of the student in Tiananmen Square who squared off against a tank and won. She'll lie in my path and refuse to cooperate, even when I shift her with my foot. I've contemplated drop kicking her a few times, but I am a pastor, after all. So I've taken to a more compassionate approach—leaving her food on the other side of Devon State Road. “There you go, sweetie-pie, go play with the foxy.” She knows how to work on me, too. I am the only one of our household into whose lap she regularly crawls, and she stays there, even while I, teeth clenched massage her neck with terrifying impulses.

I'm told that the Egyptians were the first to domesticate cats, which likely accounts for the Egyptians' coming in for such vitriol from the prophets of Israel. Cats were considered by them divine, and a symbol of resurrection—which may have some truth to it as the food ploy hasn't worked yet.

A few months ago the Tiananmen Square cat, obviously irritated that her mammoth cousin had sleeping privileges that she didn't, decided to even the score by, shall we say, leaving a noxious statement of her disapproval on our new king-size bed. Three times it happened over the weeks as she took sly advantage of the seldom open door. Thankfully nothing permeated the mattress, otherwise her resurrection capabilities would have been fully tested. So, ambling around Home Depot last Tuesday, I came upon a simple, automatic door closer barely the size of a small canister of mace, which also happened to be on my list.

Back home I looked it over, figured out how it worked, and skimmed the instructions for assembly. Simple enough. Forty minutes and four trips to the basement later, I was still struggling. The cat was getting her revenge. I had gotten stuck, it finally dawned on me, because the directions seemed counterintuitive to how I imagined the door spring *should* work. What I needed to do was read the instructions, not on my terms but on the designer's terms. “But I've already read them twice!” I insisted in one of those mental conversations between the *ego* and the *id*. Finally I read the text again, this time, not projecting my views on it but listening to the instructions with a fresh ear.

In both stories that Luke tells in tandem in the Gospel's last chapter, Jesus points to the Old Testament Scriptures as proof of who he is. “Read the text,” he's saying clearly, “it will confirm who I am and what my resurrection means.” In short, that these events were predicted. On its own no textual proof can convince anyone (the door closer instructions, the claims of Scripture). Going it alone with faith in my own reason cannot convince me either (hoping for some flash of insight, ignoring the instructions). But when I bring together a receptive heart, that is, a heart that pushes beyond its judgments and preconceptions, with a willingness to be guided, and when I act on that guidance,

*resurrection* happens. That's the heart of resurrection. Resurrection is really a useless thing if it's located only in a past event, something that happened to Jesus 'back there'. It becomes an artifact. The heart's resurrection is what happens now—our resurrection with him. Jesus' real presence breaks through. Once we get past the rational nausea of trusting God implicitly, of allowing God space to speak, especially where faith seems contrary to reason. Where we are willing to watch and listen, resurrection comes stealing in.

Theodor Billroth, the eminent 19th century Viennese surgeon, used to tell his students that a doctor needed two gifts: freedom from nausea, and the power of observation. He would dip his finger into a bitter fluid and licked it off, inviting his students to do the same. They often did it without flinching. With a grin, Billroth said, "You have stood the first test well, but not the second, for none of you apparently noticed that I dipped the first finger but licked the second." It takes *both* a willingness to observe *and* trust. Then and now, the proof of the resurrection is in its effects. You know how it is. When you experience something exciting you simply must tell someone about it. Take the boy who attended prayer meeting for several weeks with his grandmother, at her insistence. He was bored silly, but being a well-mannered child he endured it. One day he was invited to a circus that came to town. He had never been to a circus and came home greatly enthused. He immediately went to tell his grandmother. "Grandma," he fairly shouted, "I went to the circus today, and let me tell you, once you've been to a circus you'll never want to go to another prayer meeting."

When resurrection is experienced, the sort that Jesus manifested to the disciples that night in the upper room, it is the most intensely real, the most validating experience of God. It pleads to be shared. Our affliction with laying pragmatic demands on religion come to seem trivial and inconsequential when resurrection does happen experientially. We have to share that new reality invading all things.

About two years ago we started to notice a flattening trend in membership and attendance here at St. John's, a trend that had been going on in mainstream churches for decades, but which we had not experienced because we had managed to stay ahead of the curve. We could devise solutions such as forming a committee to take responsibility for the problem, or limiting that responsibility to officers to "fix" the problem. But those offer short term fixes at best to long range problems. They speak of a silo-mentality, consigning the problem to an enclosure—out of sight and out of mind; someone else's problem. The truth is, it is everyone's responsibility to cultivate a good-news faith, faith that we feel compelled to share. And so we are back to that confluence of faith and pragmatism, reason and mystery, and ultimately, the courage to trust resurrection's living power to lead us. Any other response becomes, well, an individual rejection of the core of our faith—of resurrection itself.

Amen.