

Necessary Doubt

Psalm 4

Luke 24: 36b-48

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Psalm 4

Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer. How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies? But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him. When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.

There are many who say, "O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!" You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound. I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

Luke 24: 36b-48

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." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. 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." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 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, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Among the varied items that have been hard for retailers to keep in stock during the pandemic are jigsaw puzzles. Even with all the technology we have literally at our fingertips, there are still so many satisfying things that come from handling, from touching, the pieces, from creating order out of chaos, from escaping the strains of our present reality to focus instead on the intricacy of the puzzle. In a time of such unpredictability there is a sense of control as the pieces are moved around and chaos is stilled when the pieces fit together to create a beautiful scene. There is, even in a minimal way for a bit of time, a sense of order restored. Puzzles do not have an agenda, a dress code, nor time constraints or deadlines. Those 1000 little pieces of sturdy cardboard can help us to relax, encourage us in building up confidence, lead us to be creative when things feel complicated, remind us to be patient, and ultimately, they provide a great sense of accomplishment. However, they can also be vexing, challenging and frustrating when pieces do not fit together, when we become convinced that a piece is missing or that a stray piece has been included in our puzzle box.

Not too long ago we took a few weeks to work on a 1000 piece puzzle of iconic places and symbols of NH. In the midst of sorting out the pieces for a Hampton Beach postcard, the cover of the Farmers Almanac, a warning sign to brake for moose, and waterskiing on Lake Winnepesaukee, we had made some great progress and so much of the colorful photo collage puzzle was coming together, yet there were some sections that were far more challenging as the color shades were similar although the pieces just did not go together. At one point, a key piece could not be found. I looked carefully through the hundreds of remaining pieces, then back into the box itself, and under the table, but the piece was nowhere to be found. Frustrated but determined, I took a break from the break of working on the puzzle before finding the missing piece where I had overlooked it among similar pieces.

In the frustration of certain pieces not fitting together, and of pieces that were missing, and even one that did not even seem to actually belong to this puzzle, my mind wandered to the realization that what was true about the puzzle was also true about other, deeper, important, things in life. News stories in which the whole story never truly comes out so we cannot piece it all together. Thoughts about how the pandemic came to be and how it spread is another puzzle that will probably never be completed. Thoughts about faith questions and doubts that take Scripture verses and faith teachings that do not seem to align no matter how they are turned, looked at, or attempted to fit to another piece are also quite puzzling.

Our gospel lesson this morning is one of those Scripture verses and faith teachings that do not seem to align no matter how they are turned, looked at, or attempted to fit to another piece.

The disciples are gathered and hidden. They have heard that Jesus has been resurrected, yet were disbelieving, as such things just do not happen. He said it would, yet his words were never believed. Suddenly Jesus stands in their midst and greets them, "Peace be with you." Even knowing what they had heard before, even with Peter having seen the empty tomb, even with Jesus standing among them, they are still startled and terrified. Jesus invited them to see and to touch his wounds, to dismiss any doubts that he was real, yet even then they remained puzzled, Luke's gospel says that, "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering."

"While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." Isn't that puzzling, that even after all this they still do not believe, yet they can be both joyful and disbelieving at the same time?

This can be a very challenging piece for churches to put into the whole puzzle. If those who knew Jesus the best, who traveled with him, healed with him, prayed with him, ate with him, and were given lessons and insights that others were not, and they could not believe so much about him, how can we? No wonder our own Easter celebrations can be filled with joy, disbelief and wonder.

It will be later this same day when Thomas will have his own *personal* experience of doubting the resurrection, but it is here, and in the other three gospels variations of the account of Jesus' resurrection, that *no one, no group* believes the good news of Jesus' resurrection when they first hear it. No one. And this includes Jesus' own disciples, the ones who were closest to him and spent the most time with him. Disbelief, doubt, uncertainty, and puzzlement are not just for the gathering of the faithful in post- enlightenment congregations, nor the faithful all the way back to the early church. That level of disbelief starts with the disciples.

We can feel as if we are putting our faith puzzle pieces together as we read of different experiences of Jesus' life and ministry, but then like the disciples, we will have those vexing,

challenging and frustrating times when pieces do not fit together, when we become convinced that a piece is missing or even perhaps that a stray piece has been included in our puzzle box.

In an article, *Resurrection Doubts*, David Lose says that “doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt, in fact, is probably a necessary ingredient to faith. Faith, by definition, is trust in spite of a lack of evidence. Faith is not knowledge. Faith is more tension-filled. It is acting as if something is true even when you have no proof that it is. Doubt is in fact, probably a requirement of faith. Because, honestly, in light of all the death and trauma and disappointment and tragedy that colors every human life, if you don’t have at least some difficulty believing the promise that God not only raised one person, Jesus, from the dead, but also promises new life and second chances and forgiveness and grace to all, then you’re probably not paying attention.

So as we gather to worship, as we talk about the “gathering of the faithful,” we’re not talking about the gathering of those who’s faith is absolute or certain or bedrock. We’re talking about those people who have all kinds of questions and doubts but still find joy and wonder in this message of good news about new life.” Here is where the psalmist’s words sing to us, ‘But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself.’

We have many faith puzzle pieces to work with together. Some will fit nicely and easily, some will be harder to find and place, and some will always seem to not belong. Together we touch each of the pieces, create whatever order we can from chaos, be led to be creative when things feel complicated, be reminded to be patient, and ultimately, find rest and peace in the process. Amen.