

In Their Midst

How many times does someone have to tell you something before you really believe them? Once? 20 times?

Perhaps it depends on how incredible their story is. I have a cousin who as a young boy was a teller of tall tales. One day he came racing home from the woods on our grandfather's farm, claiming that he had just seen 5 Indians in full war paint, racing their horses over a hill, with bows drawn. He had narrowly escaped! The taller the tale he told, the more convincing it took!

If someone says to us, that they saw someone walking a poodle who's fur was bleached purple, and their nails pink, even though we have never seen such a thing, we might be willing to believe them. Strange - but certainly possible. And what difference really, if we choose to believe or not?? What are the consequences?

Many times throughout Scripture, Jesus told his disciples what was to happen – he would be arrested, and crucified, and then he would rise from the dead! Rising from the dead! A pretty tall tale!! It would take some convincing! I wonder if Jesus thought they were convinced?

They saw him arrested, crucified and buried. They saw the empty tomb where they had seen the body being laid. Many times they had been told by Him that he would rise from the dead. So when he did, and appeared to them behind closed doors, for some reason they were terrified. Thomas was not willing to believe what his fellow disciples reported. So Jesus appeared to Thomas. He even invited Thomas to touch the wounds.

Has a friend ever walked by your side and yet you did not recognize them? Hard to imagine. That is what happened on that road toward Emmaus.

If we turn to John, the risen Christ appeared on the beach and told his disciples to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. Difficult for the disciples in their boats to imagine that it might actually be Him!

They could not believe their eyes! They were startled and terrified, like they had seen a ghost!

He had told them he would rise from the dead. How many times did he need to tell them what was going to happen before they actually believed Him? Tall tales! They had not been convinced. He could see the doubt in their eyes.

So He broke bread with them. He ate some broiled fish with them. It took some convincing for them to believe! But it happened! They got it! They believed!

Earlier this morning we broke bread. We spoke the words of remembrance - how He broke bread and shared the cup with them. I wonder what it was like for you. What you thought about....what you felt....what you believed..... Were your eyes opened? Was your heart? What difference did it make, that you shared at the Lord's Table, that you professed your faith, that you heard words of repentance and forgiveness?

Then Jesus said to them His almost final words. A very important commission....a call upon their lives. He said that as He had proclaimed, now they were to proclaim - repentance and forgiveness of sins. He assured them what He had always assured them....that even though He would no longer be with them, the

Father would not abandon them. They were to stay together in Jerusalem until the Father clothed them with power....the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

And then He led them out to Bethany. Lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And as he did so, he was carried up to heaven. The disciples worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy! They awaited the gift of the Holy Spirit. They prepared to go out into the world, to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins. Repentance is one of those church words. Do you know what it means?

Repentance - to turn around, to turn away from something that is not good, to ask for forgiveness, to vow to do not participate in anything that would offend the holiness of God. To be genuine in one's declaration of regret.

Forgiveness - To forgive those who do us wrong. To be forgiven by those whom we have wronged. To know that when we repent, when we ask for forgiveness, God is sure to forgive us.

Christ called His disciples to preach, to share with one and all, that to be the people that God is calling us to be, we must repent and we must forgive, and we must accept that we are forgiven!

So let's pull this together. The disciples were told repeatedly what would happen but at least in part, they thought it was a tall tale. They needed some convincing. Faith is believing without seeing. His own disciples needed to see, to touch, to share a meal.

Not once, but again and again, the disciples needed to repent, to ask forgiveness. Again and again they needed to forgive, to be forgiven, and to accept forgiveness. It is a process that some of us need to repeat over and over again.

Not very popular words or concepts for us.....repentance, forgiveness. Not very glamorous! But there it is. The risen Christ reminded his disciples to go out into the world, calling anyone who would listen, anyone who wanted a relationship with God, to repent, and to seek forgiveness. It is His call to you and to me as well.

And not unlike the first disciples, we enter the story where we are. We come with our doubts, confusions, fears, and misunderstandings. We come with our hope, our faith, and our longing. Each week through worship, we have the opportunity to encounter the risen Christ. In the reciting of the scriptures and the preached word, we are offered the reasons for our faith. We hear proclaimed, the good news of what God has and is doing. On days like today, we eat with Christ, breaking the bread of the resurrection. The Spirit is here - opening our hearts and minds, setting our hearts on fire. And in the end, like the disciples, we are sent out into the world to be witnesses to this amazing truth.

I want to close today with this poem by Ian Reid called Confession.

Peter was caught unawares the first time. Later he had even less excuse. Each failure makes it easier to fail the next time.

What about our failures?

Words spoken which are untrue –

Sometimes true but unkind.

Words which need not have been spoken.

Words spoken deliberately

Which harm and hurt.

Words left unspoken.

Words of apology left unsaid.

Words of apology by others

Which have not been accepted.

Words of encouragement

Which have not been given.

Sick who have not been visited.

Hungry who have not been fed.

Sinners who have been despised.

Heavenly father you know us better than we know ourselves. You know our weaknesses and our sins. You know the words spoken and the actions undertaken which should never have happened. You know also how we have failed to speak or act, when we should have done.

You know how we have taken pride in our own achievements. We forget that they have been made possible only by your Spirit.

Despite all this, you continue to love us.

We acknowledge our sins.

And we accept your forgiveness.

Amen