

Third Sunday of Easter

April 18, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Luke 24:36b-48

^{36b}Jesus himself stood among [the disciples] 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, “Thus 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.”

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

Her name was Janet. She and her husband stopped by my office one day because they had something they wanted to share with me. From the serious looks on their faces, I could tell that they hadn't come by just for a friendly chat. After they both sat down, Joe, Janet's husband, began to tell me that they had recently been to see the doctor about some of Janet's memory issues. Janet started to become more and more forgetful of things and would occasionally act like she was living in the past. After the doctor ran some tests, it was concluded that Janet had early onset Alzheimer's disease.



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After speaking some comforting words to both Janet and Joe, we sat in silence for a period of time. Janet was the one who eventually broke the silence when she asked me a question. The question that Janet asked threw me into a theological quandary. She asked me, “Pastor, will God still remember me, even if I cannot remember him or who I am?” I didn’t know how to answer her. It was a question that I had never thought about before. In the moment I decided to err on the side of grace and told Janet that I was sure God would always remember her. Yet, even as I said those words to her, I felt in my heart uncertainty and that I needed to explore this question further.

The question of whether or not people with dementia would still be remembered by God, even if they couldn’t remember God themselves, led me to read a book called *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* by John Swinton. In the book, the author makes the theological claim that the essence of our identity is not found in the limitations of the human mind. In other words, who we are is more than just our brains.

Yes, the human mind is the organ that not only controls our bodily functions, but also helps us to develop our personality. We would not be who we are without our brains. This is why the disease of dementia can seem so cruel. Dementia can block the personality and memory parts of the brain, making it seem like it robs a person of their identity. This gives the illusion that our loved one with dementia is no longer there, that they no longer have an identity.

Yet the truth of the matter is that dementia is no different from any other disease that affects our bodies. What I mean by that is, when a loved one of ours suffers from the disease of cancer, we still identify them as the person we’ve always known and loved. We don’t let the cancer change their identity. This also means that the identity of our loved one, even though they have a disease that affects their brain, does not change.

Even if they cannot remember who they are, we remember who they are. Their true identity is found in our memories of them. We remember that grandpa George loved to tell jokes, that Aunt Edna loved to bake, and that momma Lucy never missed a Bible study. Their identity continues to live in us. This is why it is always important to share our stories of loved ones with others.



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But, just as the identity of our loved ones are found in our memories of them, so too is their true identity found in God's memories. In other words, God remembers our one true identity, that we are God's beloved children. It happens in baptism after we have been washed and have been anointed with the cross of Christ on our foreheads. That mark of the cross is God's claim on us that we belong to God; that we are forever God's beloved. The mark of the cross is our true identity, the very essence of our beings, and there is nothing in this world that can take that away from us. Even if we forget who we are, God remembers and therefore continues to love us.

Even without dementia it can be easy for us at times to forget our true identity. The power of sin still has the ability to affect us in ways that turn us away from who we are with lies, deception, and fear. And when we cannot see ourselves as God's beloved, it becomes harder to see others as God's beloved. This is what causes division and hatred in our world.

Thankfully, God always remembers who we are and sets into motion different ways to help us remember who we truly are. These ways are found in word, sacrament, community, and loving service. The word is there to tell us the story of God's love manifest in Christ Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The reason Jesus appeared to the disciples and communed with them while eating a piece of broiled fish, is because Jesus wanted to open their minds to the story of God's love found in the scriptures so that they would become witnesses of the good news. In the same way, we gather here each week to hear the word proclaimed in our midst so that we will believe in the good news and feel empowered to share it with others in the world. But God doesn't stop there.

In the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion God also reminds us of who we truly are. Every time we are around water, whether it is while taking a shower, a bath, swimming in the pool, relaxing in the hot tub, or staring at our reflection in the still waters of a lake, they all point us back to the waters of the font; the water that cleanses us of sin and makes us new in Christ. In the waters of the font, we remember that we have been claimed as God's beloved.

The same is true when we come to the table to eat of the bread of life and drink of the cup of salvation. Because we truly believe that Christ is present in, with, and under the bread and wine, then it goes without saying that the presence of Christ becomes a part of us as we eat of the bread and drink from the cup. The presence of Christ within us is what keeps us in abiding



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relationship with Jesus. This abiding relationship is what frees us from the powers of sin, so that we can live in the world with the likeness of Christ. In other words, we can live in the world with the identity of being God's beloved, and we can live in the world in a way that sees all people as God's beloved. But God doesn't stop there.

Since Christ has ascended and therefore unable to physically appear to us like he did to the disciples, God has chosen to bestow upon us the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that helps us to remember our true identity as God's beloved. And, while the Holy Spirit acts through word and sacrament, the Holy Spirit also chooses to act through the body of Christ, our faith community. It is through our love and service to each other that also helps each one of us remember our true identity as God's beloved. The more we respond to each other in love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness, the more and more we will experience God's amazing love.

The more we experience God's love through word, sacrament, and faith community, the more we will feel empowered to share God's love with others. The joy that we feel from the love of God is so wonderful that we will be unable to contain it to ourselves. Like a waterfall the love of God will overflow from us unto others. Then, their thankfulness for our love will increase our joy, but their thankfulness will also stir their hearts to become open to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will then create a divine curiosity within them that will start them on the journey to Jesus.

No matter how often we may forget our true identity, not found in our brains, but in the fact that God claims us as beloved, God will always remember us, and God will do all that it takes to help us remember that we are indeed God's beloved.

Amen.



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