

They Disbelieved for Joy: The Mystery of the Resurrection  
Luke 24:33-43, 50-53

April 18, 2021

The words lit-up like neon on the page: “They disbelieved for joy.” Disbelief and joy all amix. It’s a kind of spiritual oxymoron: things seemingly contradictory brought together to reveal a paradoxical truth, like “alone together”, “sweet sorrow” or “open secret”. The disciples’ hearts and minds were in a flutter. They disbelieved, and they felt joy. “They disbelieved for joy”. And text adds, they were filled with “wondering”. *What reason cannot grasp, wonder comprehends.*

It’s like Emily Dickinson’s words to a friend, “We believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble.” Yes, our faith needs to be nimble. At this point the disciples are like a person suddenly stepping on uneven ground and wobbling trying to get their balance back. Disbelieving for joy. It’s that moment you rub your eyes to see if you are really seeing what you think you see.

## I

Today's text is the end of Luke's Easter Gospel and the close of his Gospel. It happens just after the Emmaus experience: the two followers of Jesus trudging grief-stricken on the road to Emmaus, Jesus joining them though they did not recognize him, then their inviting him at dusk to join them for dinner. Then it happened: at the table he *took* the bread and *blessed* it, and *broke* it and *gave* it to them, just as he had done so many times. Suddenly they recognized him, and just as suddenly he vanished from their sight. The disciples then went to the eleven disciples and told them what had happened and how "he had been made known to them" "in the breaking of the bread." As has been happening for 2,000 years around the Table.

Then Jesus suddenly appeared to *them* and said, "Peace to you", which they needed to hear because they were startled and terrified thinking they were seeing a ghost. The appearance of a ghost is not something to which you look forward! We see the disciples trying to

wrap their minds and hearts around what was now happening in front of them.

Was he a *ghost*?—generally not good news.

Was he a *zombie*? A terrifying resuscitated corpse no longer possessing the former person’s qualities? Sue likes zombie movies, something she told me *after* we were married. So she explained such things to me.

Was he a resurrected, resuscitated corpse like Lazarus raised from the dead?

Paul described Jesus’ resurrection body as a “spiritual body”. Spirit/body—another holy oxymoron. Which is it, body or spirit? Or is it something brand new? New enough to change everything.

## II

The next verses mess with my mind—which is why I’ve never preached a sermon on the text. It deepens my perplexity.

So Jesus appears here to his frightened disciples and gently questions them: “Why are you troubled and questioning?” I’m right here in front of your eyes! “See my hands, my feet. *Handle* me and see!”

And while they sat there disbelieving for joy and full of wondering, Jesus said, “Do you have anything to eat around here?” And they brought him a piece of broiled fish—not fried or baked—broiled—and he took it and ate it, right before their eyes.

Wait a minute! Jesus’ resurrection body that appeared to Mary at the garden tomb, and then that same night appeared to the disciples behind locked doors, and to the disciples fishing in the Sea of Galilee and cooked them breakfast, now scarfing down fish? My made-up mind about what happened is beginning to wobble.

What is happening is that the normal space/time continuum is suspended, the body/spirit, heaven/earth divisions are transcended. All reality is becoming *one*.

The Celtic Christians have a phrase, “thin place”, to describe those moments, those experiences when the veil between heaven and earth, spirit and matter grows so thin as to have almost disappeared, and heaven and earth are one. Everything is *one*.

“Behold I tell you a mystery”, Paul said talking about the Resurrection. A mystery is not a problem to be solved; it is a reality to be lived.

So they “disbelieved for joy.” Joy and incredulity all at once. They rub their eyes; they try to adjust their brains to what they are experiencing. I am still trying to adjust my brain to what I read in the Easter stories. They challenge my theological assumptions.

The writer of *Wizard of Oz*, L. Frank Baum, wrote another book called *Rinkitink in Oz*. In it the magical White Pearl, who was very wise, said to young prince Inga “Never question the truth of what you fail to understand, for the world is filled with wonders.”<sup>1</sup>

Are we willing to suspend disbelief long enough to see the wonders all around us? What this passage today brings to me is the wonder that everything is one, earth and heaven, spirit and matter! Thin places are everywhere—if we will open our minds, our hearts, our eyes. God may meet us at any moment. Everytime I see a blue heron, I stop and say “Hi God, Thanks for showing up!” Christ can appear to us—“Christ plays in ten thousand places”—as Hopkins wrote—then he is off, on his way to someone else.

Peter Mayer, the folk artist has written a song that says this to me: *Holy Now*. In my office I have a scrabble tray with these Scrabble letters: HOLY NOW. H with a 4, O with a 1, L with a 1, Y with a 4, N with a 1, O with a 1, and W with a 4. HOLY NOW. It goes like this:

When I was a boy, each week

On Sunday we would go to church,

Pay attention to the priest

He would read the holy word.

Consecrate the holy bread.

And everyone would kneel and bow.

Today the only difference is

Everything is holy now.

Everything, Everything

Everything is holy now.

When I was in Sunday School

We would learn about the time

Moses split the sea in two

Jesus made the water wine

I remember feeling sad

That miracles don't happen still

But I can't keep track

'Cause everything's a miracle

Everything, Everything

Everything's a miracle

Wine from water is not so small  
But an even better magic trick  
Is that anything is here at all.  
So the challenging thing becomes  
Not to look for miracles  
But finding where there isn't one.

Holy water was rare at best  
It barely wet my fingertips  
But now I have to hold my breath  
Like I'm swimming in a sea of it.  
It used to be a world half there  
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down  
But I walk it with reverent air  
'Cause everything is holy now  
Everything, Everything  
Everything is holy now.



This morning outside I stood  
Saw a little red-winged bird  
Shining like a burning bush  
Singing like a scripture verse  
It made me want to bow my head  
I remember when the church let out  
How things have changed since then  
Everything is holy now  
It used to be a world half there  
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down  
But I walk it with a reverent air  
'Cause everything is holy now.

In 1945 an Egyptian peasant named Mohammed Ali uncovered an ancient set of jars. Hoping to find gold, disappointed, he instead found a set of ancient manuscripts we now call the Nod Hammadi library, one of the most important discoveries of our time. One of

them was the *Gospel of Thomas* long thought lost forever. It is a gospel of 114 sayings. It speaks to the holiness of all things. In one saying Jesus says: “Cleave a piece of wood and I am there. Lift up a stone and you will find me (Saying 77)”. When asked about the kingdom of God, he said, “The kingdom of God is inside of you and outside of you (Saying 3).” And when asked *when* the kingdom would come, he said, “The kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it”. (Saying 113) Meaning, it is all around us. Just see!

Everything is holy now.

### III

Now comes the end of Luke’s Gospel.

He led them out as far as Bethany,

He lifted up his hands and blessed them,

And as he was blessing them

And was carried into heaven.

We call it the “Ascension.” There in the great unroofed church of creation, Jesus returned to heaven, returned that he may be with us everywhere. And disciples “worshipped him”, the text ends, and were “filled with joy”. Pure undiluted joy.

He is risen! Everything is Holy Now.

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1. L. Frank Baum, *Rinkitink in Oz* (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Co., 1916) p.26.