

Third Sunday of Easter
April 18, 2021
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Luke 24:36b-48

On Jesus' first day as the resurrected Christ, he left the tomb, walked to Emmaus with Cleopas and the unnamed disciple, and appeared to the disciples that evening in Jerusalem. Quite a first day.

They probably thought he was an apparition. To quell their fears, Jesus showed them the stigmata on his hands and feet and invited them to touch him to assure themselves that he was real. He even ate a piece of broiled fish. His physical presence convinced them that he was the risen Christ.

If I had to create a bumper sticker phrase to describe the church, I'd suggest something like this, "Incarnation. Jesus is alive."

We're the church, the body of Christ. Typically, we consider the term a metaphor. What if, though, the term is a physical description? How does that change the way we understand our place as the church in our community?

Several years ago, I pondered this question. I told people, "We're not called the body of Christ for nothing. We're supposed to incarnate Jesus." I still believe this. Succinctly, "How do we make Jesus real?"

The eleven that first Easter night (ten if we go by John's account) didn't believe their eyes until Jesus offered them physical signs of his presence. Though, theologically, today the Holy Spirit is the manifestation of Jesus, that is too vague for people who have little to no understanding of Jesus beyond being born of a virgin in December and being resurrected while bunnies hopped around the garden.

Even though they may have no theological understanding that Jesus is present now, they know the praxis of Jesus. They know he was compassionate and took care of people who were poor. They know he healed the sick and he performed miracles, like feeding 5000 people with only some bread and a few fish.

As the church, then, we have the task to fill the gap between the theology of Jesus and the praxis of Jesus. We're the connective tissue binding them together because theology informs praxis and praxis manifests theology. When we incarnate Jesus, we fill that gap. We become the connective tissue.

I recently had a conversation with a couple of co-workers at the hospice office. They're in their 40s. They grew up going to church, but drifted away. Neither expressed any interest in worshiping in church, but they were completely on board for missions.

People know that Jesus made a difference in the world, though they can't articulate it theologically. They know that Jesus still makes a difference in the world today, even though his time on earth ended 2000 years ago. Ask almost anyone these days about the state of the world and they will tell you it's terrible. Consequently, people want to make a difference in the world or at least feel that they make a difference.

Furthermore, people will find different outlets in their communities where they can make a difference. It might be service organizations like Rotary or Lion's Club. It could be fraternal organizations like the Masons or the Eastern Star. People volunteer at hospitals and other community institutions. Seemingly last on the list is churches.

We need to ask ourselves why. Is it that people see us more concerned with institutional maintenance over making a difference in the world? Or do we project an image that we're more

like a club which counts membership more than service? Or are we too quiet about what we do that makes a difference in this world?

Incarnating Jesus is a must. We've got a good start with the Community Cupboard, especially since food figured in Jesus' ministry. I'm wondering if we can't do more with food, especially as we're seeing a broad increased awareness of nutrition importance for overall and long term health. We have plans afoot to create a pallet garden. What about a lecture series on nutrition? Can we teach cooking? What about cooking lessons to widowers and widows whose spouses cooked for them?

We should also keep in mind that Jesus didn't have people come to him. He traveled among the people. Can we get out among the people in this community? What can we do to bring our food ministry into the community?

Jesus is for many people today a mythic figure from the past. They don't realize that Jesus lives in this moment. It's up to the church, us, the body Christ, to incarnate Jesus. It's up to us to make Jesus real. It's up to us to make Jesus a real presence in this community so they will join our ministry, which will connect the gap between theology and praxis. It's in this gap where they will find God.