

## The Third Sunday of Easter [Year B] – A Sermon for Every Sunday

Acts 3:12-19

Psalm 4

1 John 3:1-7

**LUKE 24:36-48**

Teeth and bones.

I'll never forget the time we took our daughters to Washington, D.C., for a short trip and of all the things they saw there, the teeth and bones probably fascinated them more than anything else. The monuments, the Metro system, the marvelous dresses of the first ladies—it was hard to choose just one highlight, but I did notice a distinct spark of curiosity arise in both of the girls when we came to the mummy exhibit and the early human exhibit in the Museum of Natural History. They had a thousand questions. Fossils and replicas of the “cave people” captivated one of them, and the funeral practices of ancient Egypt entranced the other. If it had not been for the glass of the display case, I guarantee you they would have picked up those old teeth and bones and held them in their hands. Instead they had to settle for a fragment of cow bone we came across the next day in the pasture behind their great-grandmother's house.

I don't think I could have predicted their fascination with these things, but it makes sense. Most things about living creatures eventually waste away and disappear but teeth and bones are like rocks. Solid and more permanent, they linger around to present us with mysterious truths about life in another era.

Teeth and bones.

In this morning's gospel lesson Jesus is the exhibit, and there's no glass display case to keep people from touching him. In fact, he invites it. “Touch and see,” he says, offering himself up like an old cow bone to be picked up and turned over in their own hands. This time, Jesus is full of mysterious truths about life in a new era, an era where death and suffering will not ultimately have power over God's creation.

The wounds on his hands and feet are surely there, but Luke does not mention them. It appears Jesus' aim here is to focus on the parts of him that prove he's real, that he has substance. It's for that same reason that he then asks for something to eat and he chews on some fish: his disciples are not convinced that what they're seeing isn't just a ghost. Typical Middle eastern dress for men was a long tunic that would have covered his whole body except his feet and hands, two body parts whose bony structure also happens to be clearly discernible. I suppose that if there are such things as ghosts, they could have wounds just as easily as not. But teeth and bones? Those belong to real people. Jesus wants them to be able to grasp him, to know that they can grab hold of him. The mysterious truth of this new era where death and suffering have been conquered is not just something in our heads or sense in our hearts. It takes real shape in our world in the form of people who have teeth and bones, themselves.

Does Jesus' proof of existence work? To be quite honest, it's not clear that it does. The disciples' reactions certainly change, though. At first they are startled and terrified. Jesus mentions that they have doubts in their hearts. After a while they move to a sense of joy but they are still wondering, and even disbelieving. Even after he eats the broiled fish, no mention is made that he's persuaded them. In fact, nowhere in this story is any mention ever made of their faith, or that they change their minds about his substance and respond to him as their risen Lord.

No matter. Jesus just launches into his explanation about how the whole crucifixion and resurrection was part of God's plan, which was revealed in the Scriptures. Then, in what is perhaps the biggest surprise of this whole interaction, he enlists them in the ministry of his mission. Jesus suffered, died, and rose again so that forgiveness of sins may be announced and lived in the way of repentance; that is, in the repeated turning around from the ways of the world,

hearing about God's mercy and having the opportunity to align our lives with it. "You are witnesses of these things," he says. The bones, the teeth, the story of forgiveness, the empty grave...they are witnesses of these things.

Notice that Jesus coerces no one to believe, and neither does he exclude or belittle those who can't or don't. He simply presents himself again and again in a loving and unaggressive way that seeks to reassure. And despite what conclusions of faith they must reach about his presence before them, they are still witnesses of what they have seen and heard. Despite what they may eventually come to believe about those promises and prophecies revealed in Scripture, they can't un-see the exhibit in front of them. They are witnesses.

Sisters and brothers, let me suggest that this is one of the best descriptions of the church's ministry: to be witnesses to this story, to be people who testify to the apostles' experience of eating with their real, human Lord, on the third day after his crucifixion. When all is said and done, that's really what we are: wide-eyed children of God who've been led to the display case with the teeth and the bones. We can and will reach our own conclusions about the mysterious truth we're beholding—that Jesus is risen—but we can't un-see it, un-hear it. We are witnesses of these things. Likewise, we can and will feel any number of emotions about this table the Lord gathers us around and about the heavenly food we receive at it, but we can't be un-gathered now, and we can't be un-fed. We are witnesses of these things.

The principal task of our faith and life together is not, then, to be arguers for the existence of God (as much as I love to do that at times), especially not the kind of people who coerce or belittle others into believing—and neither is it to be moral policemen and policewomen, lecturing others on what others should and shouldn't be doing. Gently correcting others' behavior and engaging in lively debate about God are both good things, given the right opportunity, and confident witnessing may, in fact, involve them, but the ministry of Jesus disciples is first and foremost to be witnesses, to say, "We have heard these things and let me tell you how I have experienced the Lord's grace."

Because just as the disciples needed an authentic Jesus that day, just as the disciples needed teeth and bones to help them move from terror to joy, the world is in need of an authentic witness to Christ, one that takes up space in the world, one that has a backbone and bites down on things like injustice and pain. After all, the psalmist this morning reminds us that "*There are many who are saying, 'O, that we might see some good!'*" The church's call is not just to be people who gather every now and then to think nice thoughts about God (as happy as they may be) but a communion whose presence and activity puts "flesh and bones" to the presence of Christ in the world.

Rollie Martinson, an authority in youth and family ministry who once taught at Luther Seminary, gave some remarks at a youth mission conference I was following on Twitter a couple of years ago. He was talking about the current religious landscape in America and how people in our culture have more options and obligations on Sunday morning than probably ever before. In one sense, this is good: that means there are more places for us to be the body of Christ, especially when you think about all the on-line offerings churches now have. However, with such a consumerist culture, the idea and practice of church as a community—as a body—is easy to lose sight of. In his observation, young people, especially, are being lost in this shift. One result of this change is that families tend to look for a congregation to give their children morals rather than as a place to nurture the gift of faith. Said a little differently, the church's challenge is to be a body of "teeth and bones," as a communion that takes up space in the world, embodying forgiveness, a community that nurtures its ability to be witnesses together with Word and

sacrament. And those things are a little more difficult to keep track of—from my perspective as well as yours, I’m sure—if people view church as little more than time to tank up on spirituality, say, or religious entertainment, or even intellectual stimulation. The good news is that even when we do, the teeth-and-bones Jesus is still liable to appear and pull us back in, give us new eyes.

A few years ago on Maundy Thursday, the worship service where many of our fourth graders receive their First Holy Communion, the acolyte, a fifth-grader, came to sit down next to me after lighting the candles at the start of the service. The first thing he did was pick up his worship bulletin and point to something on front cover where we had listed the names of those receiving the Lord’s Supper for the first time that evening. With unmistakable pride and wide-eyed wonder, he wasted no time telling me, his finger placed on one name, “Pastor, this guy’s my *cousin!*!”

Now that’s someone who gets it, I thought. It’s so easy for me to see those names sometimes and think of them as just another batch of 10-year-olds or however-year-olds going through the motions of religious piety, getting their morals. But I realize now I’ve seen that acolyte’s face before. That’s the face of someone whose eyes and hands are pressed against the glass display case, filled with excitement because he knows he grabbed hold of something at that table for the first time last year, when he was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. That, my friends, is the look of a child of the living God who wants to know more, wants to reach deeper, a disciple who is living in forgiveness. It’s the look of a young disciple who is convinced and is glad to view me and the others around the table with him as what we truly are: we are witnesses.

Thanks be to God!

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