

## DISBELIEVING FOR JOY

Luke 24:13-53

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday of Easter Sunday, April 15, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Passage

*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'*

*Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

*As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

*While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look 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.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.*

Like many of you, I read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*<sup>1</sup> in high school. I understood it then as an adventure story set a few years before the Civil War in which a runaway slave named Jim and rustic boy named Huck travelled on a raft down the Mississippi River, a river on which the city of my own childhood sat. In the years since, I have learned that Mark Twain's novel is a classic, leading Hemingway to say that "all modern American fiction comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*."<sup>2</sup>

In a pivotal scene about a fourth way through the novel, Huck and Jim get separated on the River by a thick fog. Huck leaves the raft to try to tie it to a tow-head, but the raft gets away, and floats down the river out of sight with Jim upon it. Huck secures a canoe and looks for Jim as Jim calls out to Huck and Huck calls out to Jim, but soon the sound of the calls

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, originally published in 1885. The scene described in this sermon comes from Chapter 15.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 1950), 117. Most of the analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* in this sermon comes from Trilling.

ends, and the two are separated in the thickness and wet of a fog, with no sense of where either is or how much time has passed.

After an undetermined period of silence, Huck assumes Jim is dead. “I reckoned Jim had fetched up on a snag, maybe, and it was all up with him.” Huck is exhausted, lies down in the canoe for a catnap, but when he awakens much later, the stars are shining and the fog is gone. Huck sees “a black speck on the water.... then another speck...then another...and this time [he] is right. It [is] the raft.”

When Huck gets to the raft, he finds Jim “with his head down between his knees, asleep, with his right arm hanging over the steering oar. The other oar is smashed off, and the raft [is] littered up with leaves and branches and dirt....”

Huck lies down “under Jim’s nose on the raft... [stretches] his fists out against Jim,” and sees Jim stir.

Jim says:

Goodness gracious, is dat you, Huck?  
En you ain’ dead – you ain’ drowned – you’s back again?  
It’s too good for true...it’s too good for true.  
Lemme look at you, chile, lemme feel o’you.  
No, you ain’ dead! You’s back again, “live en soun”, jis de same ole Huck – de same ole Huck, thanks to goodness!

## II.

A few years after reading this novel – in which I admittedly didn’t remember this scene – I was sitting in church on a Sunday morning in college – something not all college students do – and the minister preached on the lengthy story Whitney, Patrick and I read to you today, the story in which, three days after his death, Jesus appears to two of his disciples on the Road to Emmaus.

- As is the case with most of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, these disciples do not recognize him.<sup>3</sup>
- He asks and they tell him what has gone on in Jerusalem the past three days with the crucifixion of the one whom they had followed.
- He teaches them about the Messiah from the scripture they hold in common.
- They still do not realize who he is.
- When they arrive in Emmaus it is late, so they ask him to stay the night.
- They share a meal of bread and wine.
- He breaks bread in their midst.
- At this point, their hearts are opened and they recognize him.
- He immediately vanishes out of their sight.
- They then return to Jerusalem within the hour, joining the other disciples.
- Jesus appears in their midst.
- They are startled and frightened.
- He shows them his hands and feet.
- While they are still “disbelieving for joy,” and wondering, he asks them for something to eat, and they give him a piece of boiled fish, which he takes and eats in their presence.

I still remember the phrase “disbelieving for joy” from the sermon I heard in college. I can still see its three-word title printed in the bulletin, and I can still see those words atop the manuscript of the sermon I picked up in the narthex the next week. Somehow those words – *disbelieving for joy* – spoke to me as a college freshman, in the season of Easter, several weeks after the death of my father. Three words appearing within and growing out of the longest narrative of the resurrection of Christ in the New Testament. The only thing I remember the minister saying is that “disbelieving for joy” is the state we are in when we cannot believe that the good that has happened has actually happened.

“...is dat you, Huck?” “Is dat you, Huck?”

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<sup>3</sup> Differing degrees of lack of recognition and/or doubt appear in the following verses: Matthew 28:17; Mark 16:11, 13, 14; Luke 24:16, 31, 37; John 20:14, 20, 25 and 21:4.

“Disbelieving for joy.”

### III.

Jim’s surprise at Huck’s resurrection – his disbelieving for joy – is in many ways more understandable than the disciples’ surprise at Jesus’ resurrection. Jim has every reason to believe that Huck has drowned in the Mississippi, just as Huck believes that Jim has drowned.

By contrast, in all four gospels, the disciples have been told, several times: “The Son of Man will suffer, be crucified, and on the third day will rise again...”<sup>4</sup> Yet in all four gospels when women go to the tomb they do not expect to find it empty, and when Jesus appears to his disciples they either do not *recognize* him or on several occasions do not initially *believe* he has been raised from the dead. Their surprise and disbelief are as intense as Jim’s, even though they had been *told* that he would rise.

For many years in Christian theology and apologetics, people have argued, and been convinced, that the resurrection must be true because so many people believed it. Because it led to the rapid growth in Christianity and its spread across the world to millions of people within a few hundred years, many have argued or concluded that the resurrection *must* be true.

This argument, while having merit, has never been *primary* for me. What persuades me, in fact, is more the opposite. Because the resurrection is *so unlikely*, *so impossible* to understand, *so difficult* to describe – we can only appropriate it by *believing* it. It is true *because* we cannot dissect it. It is true *because* we cannot describe it. It is true *because* it comes from outside history, outside nature, beyond our powers to understand. It is true because the only way we can *believe* it is to “*disbelieve*” it “for joy.”

“Is that you, Huck?” “Is that you, Huck?” “Is that you, Jesus?”

### III.

The scene in *Huckleberry Finn* is beautiful for its “disbelieving for joy.” But it also marks a crucial step in the novel.<sup>5</sup>

No sooner does Jim awaken and express his utter disbelief and joy that Huck is back, then Huck starts to play a trick on Jim. Huck tries to convince Jim that Jim has been dreaming all this up while he was asleep on the raft: the fog, the separation, the return, the reunion – all are just a figment of Jim’s dream. Because Jim trusts Huck so deeply, he seems to accept that he has dreamed the whole incident, but within a few minutes, Jim realizes Huck is trying to trick him. Jim looks straight at Huck and “without smiling” says:

When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin', all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed.

Jim then turns and goes into the wigwam on the raft.

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I need to pause and say that most of the time in preaching, I choose decorum over truth, which is sometimes a challenge when quoting dialogue and dialect of others. But in this instance, in order to feel the emotional intensity of Huck’s response to Jim once Jim has confronted Huck, I need to choose dialogue and dialect over decorum. I hope you are able to accept that choice.

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<sup>4</sup> Various forms of prediction of death – and usually resurrection – occur in the Gospels. See specifically Matthew 16:21-28, 17:22-23, 20:17-19; Mark 8:31-33, 9:30-32, 10:32-33; Luke 9:22-27; and John 12:23-24; 27-36.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Lionel Trilling’s essay on *Huckleberry Finn* in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 1950), 110-113, for this interpretation.

When Jim turns and goes into the wigwam, Huck confesses what his being “chewed out” by Jim does for him.

...that was enough [Huck says].

It made me feel so *mean* I could almost kissed his foot to get him to take it back.

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger- but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't have done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way.

Prior to this scene, despite his friendship with Jim, Huck has been committed to the moral code of his day, the only moral code he has known. It is a moral code that accepts slavery and believes that a runaway slave has to be returned to its owner. But when Huck is confronted with the *depth of affection* that Jim has for him and that he has for Jim, that recognition of their *common humanity* is so powerful that it leads Huck to discard the moral code under which he had been raised and to put all his energy behind Jim's ride toward freedom.

In the context of the utter unlikeliness of the resurrection Huck and Jim have to one another, Huck is able to say “I'm sorry” to someone he has not previously considered his equal. His moral code has begun to move beyond the “engrained customary beliefs of his time and place.”<sup>6</sup> It all begins with the unlikelihood of the resurrection he experiences.

#### IV.

If you have ever been blessed to have had an experience of “disbelieving for joy,” I hope this sermon has helped you on a *personal* level to recognize and recall the experience. And I hope the recognition and recall are as powerful today as they were “the hour [you] first believed.”<sup>7</sup>

On a *national* and *global* level, we live fractious and tense times in which we seem more ready than we have been in a good while to view and speak of other people as less than our equals and sometimes even less than human. In these times, I hope that the resurrection of Jesus Christ – so unbelievable it cannot be anything but true – leads us to the kind of telling the truth, apologizing, and moving beyond moral codes that are more “engrained...beliefs of time and place” than they are truth about human beings and truth about the ways of God.

I hope that, believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we who are Jim's will speak the truth to those who are Huck's, and we who are Huck's will listen, confess, and respond with affection, apology, and genuine change. I hope, in other words, that we can and will tell the truth to one another.

An African-American scholar sees in this novel similarity to jazz and blues. He has written of Huck:

Huck's efforts to free Jim comprise a profound expression of *love*—an assertion of the principle that for the American promise to be realized, everyone must learn *not only* to go it alone, to *solo*, but *also* to make music together with others, to *swing*.

This [he says]...is what Huckleberry Finn learns to do.

Huck knows how to *solo*; and like a true bluesman, he learns to *swing*.<sup>8</sup>

Mark Twain started writing this book a few years after the Civil War and set it a few years before that great divide.

Resurrection is so “disbelievable”  
That it can still break through and overcome  
The widest gulfs we have today,  
The greatest divides,  
If we – you and I – allow it  
To work its miracle.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Trilling, 110-113.

<sup>7</sup> John Newton, “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound” (1772).

<sup>8</sup> Robert G. O'Meally, “Introduction,” *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), xxvi.