

“The Real Deal”
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Luke 24:36b-48

Have you ever asked yourself, “Is this person ‘the real deal’?” I’ll be you’ve done it more times than you can remember about friends, business partners, colleagues at work, schoolmates, prospective employees and employers. When we buy a car or a house or go on a date or choose a doctor or select a priest, we need to know whether the person is as they seem to be. Are they legit? Do we sense that they are authentic? It’s a highly subjective, complicated question, fraught with risk to answer. Miscalculation comes with a price ranging from petty to princely, and it’s increasingly difficult to make decisions about “the real deal.”

In an era of remarkably realistic computer graphics, the boundaries between reality and fantasy have become increasingly blurred, making concealment and deception more prevalent and effective. The distinction between real versus fake takes on new urgency as advanced communications technology brings us closer together even as it ironically pushes us farther apart, turning our relationships less real and more virtual, a word that connotes something “almost true, almost good,” but not quite.

Of course, the question – is this person “the real deal” – is as old as human community, or at least as old as the Bible, parts of which have been around for the better part of 3,000 years. In the Gospel of Luke, the disciples needed an answer to “the real deal” question when they were first faced with the Risen Christ. So far, only a couple of people on their way to Emmaus had seen Jesus alive. Everybody else had to settle for an empty tomb. The disciples must have been eager to see for themselves, though they likely felt some apprehension as well. Their hopes could

have been disappointed. Confusion could have led to conflict should they have disagreed on whether the person proclaimed as Jesus arisen was, in fact, the real deal.

Maybe this is why Jesus' first words to them were "Peace be with you," not that his attempt to calm the disciples had much effect. Luke tells us in the very next verse, "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." And who can blame them? It had to be a chilling experience, but it was also indicative of their initial judgment that this Jesus was not, could not, be the "real deal." So Jesus challenged their doubt and fear.

He showed them his wounds. Yet Luke reports that, "in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." Their initial trepidation and denial had softened into a sort of "it's too good to be true" attitude. But the clincher, and this was the best part, came when Jesus asked for something to eat, and they gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he ate it. That seems to have convinced the disciples that Jesus was indeed the "real deal," a man back from the grave.

How interesting that of all the amazing things Jesus might have done to assure the disciples he was "the real deal," it was asking for a bite to eat that made all the difference. This simple gesture altered the disciples' perception, enabling them to embrace the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

When we suffer doubts and wonder whether Jesus is "the real deal," we often want something slightly more stupendous to occur, but Jesus seems to prefer common human gestures as a way of getting our attention and proving his point. Maybe it's because during his life and ministry, despite all the debates he won and the miracles he performed and the profound preaching and teaching he offered, too few people were persuaded that he was Messiah – too few, that is, to prevent his crucifixion. There's almost the sense that the resurrected Jesus has given up on remarkable deeds of power as a way to persuade people of his identity. And why

not? After all, the man has risen from the dead. Shouldn't that be enough? How do you top that?

Part of our problem when it comes to deciding whether Jesus is the "real deal" comes from our fear of being fooled. We cultivate, by necessity, a vigilant suspicion in a world where lies, half-truths, and hidden truths, seem to outnumber the "real deal" by a very high proportion. How do we know that it's really him?

We also face the problem of living in a world where there are so many ideas of who Jesus is, many of which are incompatible or even contradictory to each other. Is Jesus the wrathful judge, the forgiving friend, or both? Is Jesus Son of God, a wise if somewhat deluded philosopher, or a figment of our imagination? On what basis can we make conclusions with any degree of certainty? And there lies the rub.

We want to know for sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, but we are a people of faith, and if you possess absolute certainty on the most important truth there is, then you don't really need faith, because faith is a commitment to a trusting relationship, bound by a covenant, filled with promise and hope, but utterly lacking ironclad guarantees – mainly because faith is about freedom, and there isn't much about being free that has to do with words like "ironclad."

Of course, then we wonder, what is faith exactly? How do I know I've got it, and that it's real, and where did I get it in the first place? Fortunately, that one's easy. Faith isn't something we earn, acquire, or build. It's a gift. And faith is first and foremost the simple gift of the presence of Jesus in our midst. Receiving the gift of faith is nothing more or less than the acknowledgement of that basic truth.

Our faith grows as we learn to abide in the presence of Jesus, moment by moment and day by day, and as we bask in the peace Jesus offers, our confidence increases that our

perceptions of him are real and that, more importantly, he is real – not an abstraction, not a vain hope, not merely a historic figure, not some concocted response to our yearning for meaning and rescue – but real: in us, in others, in the Word, in the bread and wine, in the creation Jesus brought into order at the beginning of time.

In fact, the farther we travel as disciples on the lifelong pilgrimage of faith, the more we come to realize that since Jesus is the Truth with a capital “T” that there isn’t anything more real than him, and that comes as a great comfort when we’re confronted with cynical phrases like, “Welcome to the real world,” which means the world of dog eat dog, devil take the hindmost, buyer beware. When we accept and rejoice in the reality of Jesus, what we see is how what passes for “the real world,” as so often described by the supposed sophisticates of our society, isn’t really the real world after all.

The real world, the one where Jesus reigns, is a place of honesty and forthrightness; an honesty empowered by mercy and forgiveness, all of which is nourished by a love which brings peace surpassing human understanding. And like those disciples of yore, we too are called to drag that real world into the false one that occupies too many of our precious moments. We are summoned by the Risen Christ to transform the fake world of abuse and manipulation and consumption and violence by inserting, through simple, common gestures, the realness of him who died and rose again, conquering death and the powers of destruction, so that we and the whole creation might be renewed. Think you’re up for that? I hope so, because as the last verse we heard today from Luke said, “We are witnesses to these things.” Just as Jesus said to the original disciples, so he says to us. It is for us to witness these things to the world, and when it comes down to it, Jesus is the only real deal there is. Amen.