



April 19, 2015

Larry DeLong

Moving On – Luke 24:36b-48

There's an old story involving a study of optimists and pessimists and their reactions to stimuli.

One young boy, whom the researchers had already labeled a pessimist, was led into a horse barn, taken to a stall, shown a pony with all the tack – saddle, bridle, everything – and told that it was all his. Then the researchers left.

Then, they took a young girl, whom they'd labeled an optimist, to the stable next door, showed her a stall filled with manure, and told her it was all hers. Then they left her, too.

When the researchers came back to the pessimist after a while, they found him sitting on a stool, head in his hands. "Why haven't you got your pony ready for a ride?" they asked.

"Oh," the pessimist said, "it's not really mine. This is all just a big mistake, and I didn't want to get all excited about something that was just going to go away."

A bit surprised, the researchers headed off next door to see what was going on with the pessimist. She was shoveling away like mad at the pile of manure! When they asked what she was doing, she replied, “With this much manure, there’s got to be a pony in here somewhere!”

In my experience, things don’t usually work out the way they’re planned. There’s always something that goes funny, like that putt that you could have sworn would break hard right, but instead went straight on past the hole.

Most of the time, when we’re all sitting around telling stories, they’re about things like this, and most of the time, these stories are interesting to tell *because* they didn’t turn out the way we’d planned. Maybe in a funny way we can laugh about later, maybe tragically, but nonetheless, not how we wanted. After all, who wants to hear about something that went the way it was supposed to?

Often, the subject is about how we should have known better. I remember being certain that freshman year of college would be like “thirteenth grade.” No amount of first-hand experience from others who had “been there, done that” managed to change my optimism.

So, I showed up at college to start that “thirteenth grade.” Who’d have guessed that they’d actually have “double F” as a real grade?

And speaking of things that turn out unexpectedly, how about marriage? Perhaps that’s a better example: some things don’t go so

well, others far better than you could have dreamed – and there's always an ample supply of advice available, too!

But we're on this journey called life. We can be sure that things will not remain the same, no matter how hard we try to keep them that way, and that the future will turn out different than we imagine, no matter how carefully we plan.

Did you expect to be where you are right now twenty years ago? Bravo if you got it right! And a more personal question: did your life of faith turn out the way you expected?

Certainly didn't for the disciples. This passage from the end of Luke's Gospel is a great example. Try to picture the scene in your head: there's this bunch of people all in a locked room. Some of them had watched Jesus die. Some of them insisted he may have died, but he wasn't dead any more: he was alive again. So, in an age without news cameras and reporters, a time of rumor and superstition, they talked about it. Think of what they must have said! Some believing, some doubting, all fearful that they'd be next to be arrested and executed.

And then, Jesus appears among them. Just like that. The doors were locked, remember – and remember what Diane taught us about the Jesus of locked doors last week! Things were most definitely not turning out the way they expected! Overjoyed, worried – the lesson actually says that “they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their

happiness...” Jesus eats, to show that he’s not a ghost, and that despite what they thought they knew, he’d told him all about this before it happened. In fact, before they ever met him, before they were born: their Scriptures were full of his story. And our Bible has even more.

Two months ago, I preached about our purpose as a church. Got a good response, from a wide range of perspectives; my major point was that as followers of Jesus Christ gathered into this community called church, our primary goal should be to serve God. My point, oversimplified, was that if we imagine the church as a business, who is our customer? The answer is God, and all of us together work to serve God, in many different ways.

That’s an intellectual shift, which we’re in the early stages of making, but more importantly, it’s also a shift in how we go about our life of faith, not just as a community, a church, but as individuals.

Our business is to serve God. To do that, we have to make use of what God has given us: we need to take care of the facilities we use. We need to serve the needs of those who are our church. And we need to serve God by serving those out there, who, though they are children of God as well, are not part of our church. God has given to us generously, so we practice generosity in our lives both individually and as a church.

We are not some sort of club where you pay dues and expect service; we are a community that seeks to serve God, and we pool our resources, all kinds of resources, to do just that. But it isn't easy.

And part of what's difficult is our expectation of how this great mission will get done.

There's a prayer for Christmas in which we confess that "we have not trusted good news to be good." We've learned all our lives to look for the flaw in whatever good thing comes our way – and we've learned that because so often, truth is, there *is* a flaw waiting for us. Good news usually has some unpleasant or at least unforeseen difficulties attached. That's part of the questioning the disciples were doing in their happiness. The disciples are wondering what to do. So do we.

When the disciples hear that Jesus has risen from the dead, they have to ask: What does this mean for us? Diane talked about how they'd all cut and run – well, all but the women – when Jesus was at his darkest moment, when he needed them most. To win our salvation, God himself even cut Jesus off for a time. Still, they didn't go far, and once the rumor spread that something had happened, many of them came back to try and figure it out.

Well, here we are, and we know a lot more. We have not only the witness of a few to go on, we have the witness of two thousand years of faithful service to follow.

But do we? Follow, I mean?

There's a military term that applies well here: follow-on orders. When the primary objective has been accomplished, what's next? The follow-on, the next step.

That's what Jesus gives them. "Spread the word about what I've told you, and about what's happened. You know the truth, I've told you a lot, now you'll understand better what I told you before, so go tell it. Start here in Jerusalem, and take it everywhere! Get out of this room!"

And *we* gather *here* and say to ourselves, yup, they did it. The whole world knows this good news.

But that's not the whole story. Sure, the word about the resurrection and the love of God for us in Jesus Christ has gone across the whole world: but is the job of making it known done yet? I don't think so.

I look out at you wonderful people and know that many of you regularly show and share what makes your heart beat a little quicker, your love for God and God's love for you.

But not everyone. Are we like the disciples? Caught in wonder, question and confusion over something that seems so strange and unrelated and *unplanned*?

It's time to move on. Jesus has graced us by still appearing joyfully among us in everything we do in his name. Jesus doesn't want us stuck in this room – it's time for us to show that grace to others who need it, need it now.