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Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

1 John 3:1-3
Luke 24:36b-48

SACRED

You've heard the old line attributed to Ben Franklin, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." ¹ Those two 'certainties' coincided this week as the April 15th tax deadline was also the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's death. Many are aware that he was shot on the night of April 14th by John Wilkes Booth while attending a play at Ford's Theatre and died the next morning. By the church calendar, that particular night in 1865 was Good Friday, the day observed as when Jesus had been executed on the cross. By the Jewish calendar, that date that year was in the middle of Passover, the observance of the freeing of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Passover that year must have taken on special significance as millions of African Americans were being freed from the bonds of slavery. Just days before, it had been on Palm Sunday when General Lee, leader of the Confederate army, had surrendered to General Grant of the Union army, effectively ending the Civil War. So the play at Ford's Theater that night was perhaps the first time for President Lincoln to relax a bit after the end of the excruciating war. There has been speculation among some who have studied Lincoln's religious thoughts and practices that perhaps he planned to finally join the church he frequently attended, New York Avenue Presbyterian Church on that coming Easter Sunday, now that the war was over. Of course, we'll never know how that Easter Sunday would have played out if Lincoln had not been assassinated. ²

Luke's Gospel has multiple stories from what was the first Easter Sunday. A number of women had been to the tomb early that morning to anoint Jesus' body, only to be surprised to find that the stone sealing the tomb had been rolled back and his body was not there. Two angels then appeared and told them Jesus had been raised from the dead. The women go to tell the other followers of Jesus of their encounter, but their outlandish story was thought of as 'an idle tale.' But that wasn't the end of the Easter happenings. Later that same day, Luke tells us of two Jesus followers who were walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. As they walked they were joined by someone whom they did not recognize who listened to their sad expressions about Jesus' death and then this person talked about how the Hebrew scriptures pointed to fulfillment in a Messiah. When this stranger was having supper with them, when he blessed and broke bread, they recognized that it was Jesus, who then vanished from their sight. They hurried back to Jerusalem that evening to tell the disciples and others of their experience. But the other followers had already begun to believe that Jesus had risen, saying that Simon had seen him. So Easter is still playing out for them that evening. It was as they were talking about what was undoing their sense of at least one the certainties of life, that Jesus appeared in their midst. Even though they said they believed Jesus had risen from the dead, they thought they might be seeing a ghost when he showed up. He shows them his hands and feet, which still showed the wounds from his crucifixion. He offers for them to touch him so they would know he wasn't a ghost. He then asks for something to eat and they give him a piece of broiled fish, and they watch as he eats it in front of them.

It was important for Luke to make clear that even though Jesus' resurrection presence could show up and disappear quickly, that it was his body and not just his spirit that was brought back to life. That Jesus arises with the same body, now transformed and glorified, suggests that God still loves the stuff of this creation enough not to cast it off.

There are those who think of the sacred as something totally separate from the physical. It was important for Luke to reaffirm the humanity of Jesus because he was countering an argument that went like this: the world and human flesh are evil and inferior, so the goal of life is to rise above the world and eventually to escape from this world into the eternal calm of the spirit. It then followed that we can ignore the physical aspects of life in the world and focus all of our attention on so-called 'spiritual' matters, for that was where ultimate value is to be found. Therefore, physical hurts and suffering and pain of human beings as a result of hunger, disease, or slavery can be ignored by the church, the logic went. It was this kind of theology, contorted religious positioning, that held sway over much of our country's South in order to prop up the commitment to slavery. Christians must be focused on 'spiritual' concerns, on the condition of the soul so they would forget the parts of the biblical story such as God's commitment to releasing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt at Passover and Jesus' ministry to those outside the power structures of society, including to the hungry and the sick. President Lincoln and Christian abolitionists challenged not just the practice of holding slaves, but the theological mindset that would allow it. The legal structure for slavery ended with the Civil War, but the theology that was foundational to that practice has at times lived on and even thrived. We see it in movements that try to keep the church uninvolved with economic, environmental, as well as with peace and justice issues, as if such things had nothing to do with what is sacred.

Luke wants to make it clear that the resurrection of our Lord is central among the parts of the biblical witness that the physical, earthly, flesh and blood world has value to God. Jesus is not immediately taken out of this world. The sacred has much to do with the physical. "See my hands and feet and touch me," our risen Lord says. The place to look for the sacred is not just beyond the earth. God is active and alive here in the flesh. We must not ignore that part of what is sacred.

There are those who think of the sacred as something apart from the physical – it is almost a certainty of life for them. But the resurrection of our Lord challenges what may be considered such certainties of life. We must not ignore the physical parts of that which is sacred. Part of the way we are to respond to God's resurrection initiative is to open ourselves to the liberating, life-giving force set loose in the world.

At some point after her husband's death, Mrs. Lincoln gave one of the original drafts of the Emancipation Proclamation to New York Avenue Presbyterian Church as an expression of gratitude for its ministry to their family.³ This early draft, in the president's own handwriting, became his major act that showed that he was committed to the liberation of those who were held in slavery. That congregation holds that document in safekeeping. But I hope the larger church can be emancipated from any theology or practice that would keep it from fully participating in the physical aspect of all that is sacred. For Easter helps us see that God's love for the physical is more certain than even death itself.

¹ [Benjamin Franklin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_%26_Taxes), in a letter to Jean-Baptiste Leroy, 1789,
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death %26 Taxes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_%26_Taxes)

² <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2012/12/20/abraham-lincolns-faith-and-presbyterian-connection/> Rev. Phineas Gurley, Pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian, who preached Lincoln's funeral at the White House, when he was asked about Lincoln's faith after his death, said this: "In the latter days of his chastened and weary life, after the death of his son Willie, and his visit to the battle-field of Gettysburg, he said, with tears in his eyes, that he had lost confidence in everything but God, and that he now believed his heart was changed, and that he loved the Saviour, and, if he was not deceived in himself, it was his intention soon to make a profession of religion."

³ Information from conversation with Rev. Roger Gench, current pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church.