

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Mourning, Mystery, Mission: Back to the Basics”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Luke 24:36-49  
Genesis 1

All she could do was roll her eyes and sigh. The “she” in this story is my children’s high school tennis coach, Coach Sam. When our son Andy made the varsity tennis team I decided that it was time for me to take up tennis again so that I could at least hit with him and help him practice. When Coach Sam found out she asked if I would like some pointers. With great certainty that I knew exactly what I was doing, having played in Middle School, I said sure. So one day after the tennis team had finished practice, I showed up with my racket and hit and few balls with her. It was in that moment that she sighed and said, “John, show me how you are holding the racket.” OK, so let’s just say that by the end of that that short session Coach Sam had shown me how I was doing everything, and I mean pretty much everything wrong. Now she was very nice about it, but she realized that I needed to go back to the basics. I needed to relearn the fundamentals of the game if I was ever to be good at it.

Back to the basics has become one of those often overused and abused terms. It has been used by school districts to emphasize a small part of the curriculum over other parts which don’t seem as basic. At least in Texas it is the basis of driver reeducation courses. When you have received a ticket you can remove the ticket from your record if you take a course that reminds you of the basics of good driving. Back to the basics is used as the basis for helping couples reestablish their relationships...they are taught to go back to the basics of good communication. And in some ways it is used in the life of the church. We in the Christian faith have always believed that there are certain basic understandings that all Jesus’ followers ought to understand and that ought to guide our thoughts and actions. We see this lived out every time we conduct a baptism as we recite the Apostle’s Creed. The Creed contains the most basic elements of our faith about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as certain beliefs about the church and the age to come.

Where this back to the basics idea ties in with our story this morning is that I believe this is what we are getting in these closing verses of the Gospel of Luke. The writer wants his readers to be sure that they know what the basics of the resurrection are before Jesus leaves the scene. And the surest way to do this is to focus on what was surely a very small portion of the conversations that Jesus had with this followers after his resurrection. And in these closing verses I believe we see the three basic beliefs that form the foundation for how we are to understand what the resurrection is all about.

The first basic belief is that life wins. When Jesus appears to the disciples, they are afraid that he is a ghost, a spirit. Jesus wants to disabuse them of this belief and so he does two things. First he asks them to touch, knowing that spirits have no physical substance. Second he asks for something to eat, again knowing that spirits or ghosts don't eat. By so doing he let them know that life has defeated death; and by life I do not mean the eternal existence of the spirit or soul. What I mean is that physical life, the life God created in the beginning and declared to be good, has won over death which robs us of that life. What this means for Jesus' followers is that they are to care about this world and all the people in it because they matter to God. They matter so much that God raised Jesus back into this physical world.

The second basic belief is that love wins. Jesus explains to the disciples that his death was not a tragedy but was part of God's plan for the redemption of the world. That when Jesus went to the cross and gave his life, it was not an accident of history or merely the outworking of an oppressive political process, but was the love of God at work. It was the love of God at work transforming the creation; reshaping the creation back into the good place that God had created it to be. Thus the love of God for humanity wins out over all of the powers of evil which would rob of us of our potential to become fully alive as those made in God's image.

The third basic belief was that the world wins. After Jesus has proved that he is more than a spirit and has explained that his death was part of God's plan, he then commands the disciples to go into all of the world, telling everyone about basics number one and two. This is remarkable because it says that Jesus was not simply the Jewish messiah, but that he was the world's messiah; that all people are invited to find forgiveness and new life; that all people are now invited into God's family of faith in which they can rediscover what it means to be fully human and fully alive.

I realize that in traditional Christian practice these are not the kind of basics we are used to. Instead we are accustomed, as I said earlier, to doctrinal statements about aspects of our faith. Yet I believe that these three basics, life wins, love wins and the world wins, underlie all the other particularities of doctrine because they are rooted in all of scripture from the creation in Genesis to the re-creation in Revelation. They are God's story. They are our story. My challenge for you on this day then, is first to see these three basics here at the communion table, and second to ask yourselves, how these basics are shaping who I am and what I believe, say and do.