36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”
37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.
38 He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”
39 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.
40 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?”
41 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.
42 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”
43 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.
44 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Years ago there was a story about a judge in Yugoslavia who had an unfortunate accident. He was electrocuted when he reached up to turn on the light while standing in the bathtub. His wife found his body sprawled on the bathroom floor. She called for help. Friends and neighbours, police, the whole shebang showed up. The judge was
pronounced dead and taken to the funeral home. The local radio picked up the story and broadcast it all over the airwaves.

But---in the middle of the night, the judge came to. He realized where he was, and rushed over to alert the night watchman, who promptly ran off, terrified. The judge’s first thought was to phone his wife and reassure her. But he got no further than, "Darling, it's me," when she screamed and fainted.

He tried calling a couple of the neighbours but they all thought it was some sort of sick prank. He even went so far as to go to the homes of several friends but they were all sure he was a ghost.

Finally, he was able to call a friend in the next town who hadn't heard of his death. This friend was able to convince his family and other friends that he really was alive.

(Bruce Larson, LIVING BEYOND OUR FEARS (New York: Harper & Row, 1990)

Some things are just very hard to believe.

So it was in our lesson this morning.

On that first Easter, Jesus appeared from out of nowhere, amongst the disciples. They were startled—frightened.

Jesus told them to touch Him.
He was no ghost.
He was real.
He was alive.

To further prove this He ate with them. He reminded them of what He had told them before His death. And then Jesus taught them from Scripture how what had happened was indeed the fulfilment of what was meant to be.
There are two things in this story that I want to concentrate on this morning.

First, the disciple’s reaction to Jesus.
Second, Jesus’ response to their reaction.

When Jesus first appeared, we are told the disciples were frightened. Their response was fear, just like the friends and loved ones of the unfortunate judge. Jesus’ appearance startled them. They were unprepared for it. They couldn’t believe Jesus could be there so they were afraid.

Then, there was a second reaction. After Jesus showed them His hands and feet they still couldn’t grasp it.

Eugene Peterson in “The Message” translates what happened this way:

“...He showed them His hands and feet. They still couldn’t believe what they were seeing. It was too much; it seemed too good to be true.”

First fear—then it was too good to be true.

Jesus couldn’t win! But the Lord was determined that they would believe. His response to their fear and amazement was to accept where they were and gently guide them to the truth.

There was no need to fear. Jesus came to show them He was risen. It wasn’t too good to be true. It was just good—amazing, wondrous—and true!
Jesus took their unbelief, accepted them where they were and nurtured them into faith. He understood their hesitation and met it with sympathy and patience. It really was an awesome event!

No wonder they had difficulty with it. No wonder their limited minds couldn’t get around what had actually happened.

Jesus had predicted it but who would have thought that it would actually happen. After all, the Cross was an awful and deadly thing. And death was so final.

At least until now!

Faith in something so awesome couldn’t simply be turned on like a tap. Even the disciples needed time to take it all in—to come to grips with what had truly happened and what it truly meant. Fear and amazement aren’t really so surprising reactions when you think about it.

But then neither is Jesus’ response surprising.

Would love—could love respond any other way than with persistent understanding and nurture?

Jesus didn’t expect the disciples to be nonchalant about what had happened. He met them in the midst of their human reaction and loved them to Himself.

Now that was 2000 years ago.

That was Jesus actually appearing to people in the flesh.
What about today?
What about us?

Surveys in the U.S. tell us that a majority of non-Christians believe that Christ was raised from the dead. They did better than the disciples initially.

Yet they don’t profess the Christian faith.

Somewhere along the line something has been twisted. People can believe one of the major tenets of the Christian faith without it bringing them to faith in Christ. For many people, there must be more than the resurrection that is hard to believe.

Faith that is true faith—faith that is more than intellectual assent to a set of facts is not easy to develop. If it were, then everyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Risen Son of God would be Christians but that, sadly, isn’t the case.

Many things can get in the way of faith.

Fear is certainly one of them. There is a great deal of fear in our world. There seems to be a phobia for almost every experience of life. Indeed some people fear just living.

Ann Landers used to receive an average of ten thousand letters each month—nearly all of them from people with problems. She was asked once if there was one predominant theme in the letters she received.

She said, "The one problem above all others seems to be fear. People are afraid of losing their health, their wealth, and their loved ones. People are afraid of life itself."
Fear can keep people from faith. It can keep people from the very thing in life that can offer assurance and hope.

They can fear God. They can fear the changes that will happen in their new Christian life. They can fear the reaction from other people.

Fear can make things hard to believe on the deeper level of faith.

Amazement can also keep people from faith.

Christianity can appear to be too good to be true.

Grace—God’s unconditional love and acceptance, just doesn’t make sense to some people who feel they must earn every blessing and deserve every morsel of love in life. Many people feel so badly about themselves that they cannot accept a message that says God loves them just as they are and considers them special despite all their warts and weaknesses. God seeking a loving relationship with them is just too hard to believe.

There are many other reasons people don’t come to a meaningful faith in Jesus Christ. In many ways every person who doesn’t have faith has their own unique blend of reasons. We can never hope to understand them fully.

But God does understand.
God understands and accepts them where they are at. Just as Christ came to the disciples knowing what they needed to believe and have faith, so God continues to come to people through the work and power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes over and over again—seeking to nurture people—seeking to open their minds and hearts—seeking to deal with the complexities that draw them away from faith.

The disciple’s difficulty in believing melted away as Jesus opened Himself up to them. For many others the process is much longer—much harder. It requires persistence and determination on God’s part to break down the barriers to faith. But God offers and offers. The gift of faith is presented time and time again. For those who find it hard to believe, thankfully, it is also hard to resist.

A little boy was afraid of the dark. One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom.

The little boy turned to his mother and said, "Mama, I don't want to go out there. It's dark."

The mother smiled reassuringly at her son.
"You don't have to be afraid of the dark," she explained. "Jesus is out there. He'll look after you and protect you."

The little boy looked at his mother real hard and asked, "Are you sure he's out there?"
"Yes, I'm sure. He is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need him," she said.

The little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and cracked it open a little.

Peering out into the darkness, he called, "Jesus? If you're out there, would you please hand me the broom?"
Jesus is always there. Through His Spirit, He seeks to change fear of God into seeking God. He knows us so well and seeks to deal with any other obstacle to faith we might have.

For we who know the experience of His love and presence, hopefully, that’s not too hard to believe!

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