

April 23, 2017
Second Sunday of Easter

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Stop Making Sense”

The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum



*"It doesn't make any sense. It doesn't make **Any** sense ... that's why I trust it."*
~ Kate Winslet

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Psalm 133

¹*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*

²*It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.*

³*It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.*

John 20:19–29

¹⁹*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”* ²⁰*After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* ²¹*Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”* ²²*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.* ²³*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* ²⁴*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.* ²⁵*So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”*

²⁶*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”* ²⁷*Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”* ²⁸*Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”* ²⁹*Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

“Stop Making Sense”
Psalm 133; John 20:19–29

The 1990’s television drama *The X Files* centers around a top-secret branch of the FBI tasked with investigating claims of paranormal activity and extraterrestrial life. The two Agents in charge of this classified work are Dana Scully, and Fox Mulder. Scully is a woman of science. She is ruled by logic. She seeks the rational explanation behind the bizarre and unusual occurrences the partners investigate. Mulder, on the other hand has a deep desire to reveal the true paranormal underpinnings of our seemingly mundane world. This desire is firmly rooted in the traumatic events of his past.

When he was 11 years old, Fox Mulder’s younger sister went missing, and was never found. Mulder grew up convinced that his sister Samantha had been abducted by aliens. This belief was the driving force behind his decision as an adult to join the FBI task force that investigated the X Files. Above Mulder’s desk at FBI headquarters, hung a large poster showing a 1950’s era grainy photograph of a UFO – that classic ‘flying saucer’. Written in bold letters across the top of the photograph are the words, “I Want to Believe.” Dana Scully and Fox Mulder embody the dueling impulses that reside within the heart of Thomas in this morning’s story. They embody the dueling impulses in *all of our* hearts. Like Thomas, we want to believe. But this just doesn’t make *any* sense.

At the heart of our faith lies this relentless, unsettling mystery: the death and resurrection of Christ. It is the centerpiece of our Christian faith. Yet, this is the very point on which our faith often hits a snag. We are a people of faith steeped in an intellectual tradition. We place a high value on critical thinking. So we sometimes catch ourselves trying to make the resurrection “make more sense”. We want a way to explain this logically. Or we want the legend to be enough, and the details and validity of the story’s facts to be inconsequential. We attempt to approach the events of the resurrection through metaphor, pointing to the return of spring after the dead of winter, or to butterflies that break through their cocoon tombs, but none of this truly captures the reality that we claim as followers of Christ: Jesus was dead. He was dead. And now he *is* alive.

When it comes to resurrection, our critical thinking minds cannot help us. Our intellects falter. We don't know how to talk about it, because there is nothing in our realm of understanding with which we can compare it. It doesn't make sense. And when something doesn't make sense to us, when we don't know how to talk about it, we find it nearly impossible to conceive of its reality. Alas, my friends, this season is not a time for rational thought. It is not a time for proofs. This is the mysterious season of Easter – a time to forget what we know, and what we can prove. Now is the time to stop talking about whether or not we understand what happened, and to start proclaiming in word and deed that Christ is alive and well and living here among us. As the expectation-shattering reality of the resurrection sets in, it's time to stop making sense of it all, and take a deep collective dive into the mystery.

Acts: A community that has stopped making sense

One of the lectionary texts we did not read for this morning is the account of the post-resurrection early church from Acts. In it, the writer describes a church that has stopped making sense. Using strikingly similar language to that of the Psalmist in today's first lesson, the author of Acts gives readers a glimpse of a church in stark contrast to Thomas, Peter and the others on the evening of that first Easter:

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the Apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

This is the 'Resurrection' community, living squarely in the midst of that jubilant disorientation we are called into during the season between Easter Morning and Pentecost Sunday. Otherworldly, and idyllic, the church in Acts is a picture of people living transformed by a radical shift in their reality. Death has been conquered. Luke's portrayal of the lives of these early disciples was a witness to the reality-shifting power of what Christ had done. It was also a challenge to the social norms of the day. Need was prioritized over greed. Love was prioritized over power. Together they went throughout the region proclaiming the gospel of the Risen Christ.

This is exactly the example we need, especially after a week like Holy Week, when we witnessed the unity of the disciples fracture and fray under the weight of betrayal and despair. This is the example we need on a Sunday like today – when the fanfare and proclamation of Easter morning are over, when we see the disciples huddled and afraid, when nothing makes sense, and doubt begins to creep in about what we *might have seen or heard* in the early hours of last Sunday morning.

This is what we need to encourage us to stop making sense – to stop talking and start *living into* this expectation-shattering reality. The image of a community so at one in heart and mind that not even physical possessions, or personal pride would be spared to meet the people's needs, shows the contemporary world an absurd picture of a people we might accuse of being naïve, communist, or plain stupid.

The Church in Acts teaches us the power of living within the mystery. They carried out their communal life with the confidence that if God could raise Jesus from the dead, then literally anything is possible. Can we really submit our egos and put love first in our hearts? Yes. Can people with different points of view, different personalities, and different traditions really live together in one unified community? Yes! Can the desire for justice overcome our greed for possessions and power? Yes, and yes. I can't explain it. It doesn't make sense, but God raised Jesus from the dead. Nothing is going to make sense in the same way again after that. These things are not easy. They were not easy for those living in the early church. Even in their own time and place, these would have been subversive and dangerous practices. Resurrection words – and resurrection lives – will always look like a threat to a world that lives in fear, isolation, and individualism. But Christ is alive and well, and living among us.

The “Mad Farmer”

Wendell Berry is a writer, an ecologist, a theologian and a farmer. He describes himself as a person who “takes the Gospel seriously”, and is well known both for his activism and his outspoken critique of “Christianity that fails to challenge cultural complacency”. His words and actions often don't make sense to people. But he's perfectly alright with that. In 1973 he wrote a poem, commonly referred to as “The Mad Farmer's Manifesto.” In it, he charges all of us to stop making sense, and start living in mystery. He writes:

*So friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
Has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers...
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.
Practice Resurrection.*

Amen.