

I think this is my favorite Gospel lesson of the Easter Season. I like the others, of course. Stories of angels and an empty tomb, of joyous woman and frightened disciples, of Thomas the doubter and John the believer – they're all good. But, somehow, they're all part of the stained-glass Easter story – the one that is so incredible we don't quite know how to get our heads around it, even when we gladly embrace it in our hearts.

But today we're not in that incredible world any more. We're just on a country road with two ordinary people – two people who are so undistinguished, so everyday, so run-of-the-mill that we haven't met them before. One of them, Cleopas, by his name, is a male. Is the other one female, and perhaps his wife? Some people think so, but there's no way to tell. They may have been with Jesus from the beginning, but they were never part of the inner circle, certainly not among the twelve, probably not relatives, just part of the crowd – just ordinary people who loved Jesus and looked to him for hope and leadership. And, now, when we meet them, they are so very sad and discouraged because they believe their hope is gone and their love lies buried in the grave.

The funny thing is they've already heard the stained-glass Easter Story. The women told them about the angels and the empty tomb. They admit as much. So when Cleopas and his partner are walking along the road to Emmaus, they've already heard as much of the Easter story as you and I get every year from the scripture lessons. But, just like us, they don't really believe it. Just like us, they are not at all pre-disposed to believe it – which sort of counters any explanation of Jesus' resurrection being wishful thinking on the part of his disciples. No, dead is dead. That's what Cleopas and his pal think. They haven't got any other way to take hold of this incredible story.

But, that's just the point – the point when they have allowed death to take hold of them – that's when a stranger joins them on the road and starts talking to them about their once bright hope. In a very powerful and compelling way, he starts opening up the scriptures and shows them the whole scope of God's purpose from the beginning of creation, to the history of Israel, to the coming of God's Servant and his suffering, right down to their own lives and the longing of their own hearts. Suddenly, something opens up inside them. It's not quite belief, but it is the beginning of illumination. Sadness is pushed aside and an eagerness to learn more takes hold of them. Later, they will say to each

other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

Now, they’ve come to the village of Emmaus which the disciples think is their destination. They’ve probably chosen it as a hiding place from the Jerusalem authorities. Here, they think they will part and the Stranger is already moving on. But, this man has brought such power and unexpected energy into their emptiness and despair that they beg him to stay with them for a meal. “Stay with us, because it is almost evening.” Or, as the King James Version puts it, “Abide with us ... for the day is far spent.” That is such wonderful language, and it tells us that this is not simply a casual invitation. This is the cry of the heart from those who have come to the end of their own resources, from those who believe that their labor has been in vain, from those who long for the companionship of one who truly understands their grief and can point beyond their sense of desolation and finality. “Stay with us.” “Abide with us.” Be our true companion – which is a word that means, “One with whom we break bread.”

And, so it happens. While they are at table, the Stranger becomes the Host. He takes the bread. He blesses it. He breaks it. He gives it to them in that four-fold action that has marked the Christian Eucharist from Jesus' earthly life until this very day. He took bread – He blessed it – He broke it – He gave it to them – and their eyes were opened.

By this sacrament of bread and wine, the Risen Christ has been present with his people from the beginning, and will be present with them until the end of time. Whenever, and wherever the friends of Jesus are gathered, this is what has been done that He may be with us. The bread of our lives is offered. The cup of our joy and our sorrow is placed beside it. And, as it is given, with the same longing and trust of those two ordinary disciples of old, so it is received into His hands. He takes it, He blesses it, He breaks it, and gives it back to us. Now, it is no longer our offering, but His – His flesh, His blood, His sacrifice, His victory, and His Risen Life – feeding, strengthening, and transforming us for the journey. It is His True Presence uniting us, both to one another and to the Eternal Life and purposes of God. This is what the church has always done – in beautiful cathedrals and in mud huts – in times of joy and celebration, and in times of sorrow and fear. Ordinary, unconvinced disciples, like you and me, have gathered, said our prayers,

offered the symbols of our lives, and have received, in return, the Body and Blood of Christ – The Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Salvation. In this simple act – in the congregation gathered – in the Word spoken – in the bread broken and shared – the Risen Christ is present, just as He was present to the disciples of old. Here, in this sacrament, week after week, by His own promise, He will meet us and receive us. Here, he will journey with us. Here, he will abide with us forever. Here, our eyes will be opened and we, too, will recognize Him. From the very first, the prayer of the Church and its ordinary disciples has always been, “Risen Lord, be known to us in the breaking of the bread.”

Now, perhaps, I should just stop here affirming that the church has always has always know the presence of the Risen Christ scripture and in sacrament. But, there are three elements by which the Risen Christ is known in this Gospel lesson. So, to the Scripture and the Sacrament, we must add the Stranger.

Without the Stranger, the disciples of long ago would still be buried in death. Without the Stranger, they would have held to their old certainties – that dead is dead. Without the Stranger, they would not have seen, through fresh eyes, the infinite power of God for Life, nor would they have heard the Word of God with that new understanding that set their hearts on fire. Without the Stranger they would have had no occasion to tell their story to one who could receive it in love and interpret it in a way that brought healing and renewed challenge to their lives. Without the Stranger, they would not have been prompted to share their bread, and so they would have missed the companionship of the Lord of Life. Most congregations are faithful to Word and Sacrament. If their members do not see the Risen Christ; if they do not receive His blessing, it is very often because they do not welcome the stranger. There is a Celtic Rune of Hospitality that says:

I saw a stranger yesterday;  
I put food in the eating place,  
drink in the drinking place,  
music in the listening place;  
And in the sacred name of the Triune God  
he blessed myself and my house,  
my cattle and my dear ones,  
and the lark said in her song:  
Oft, Oft, Oft,  
goes Christ in the stranger's guise.

This is my favorite Easter story because it just won't stay in stained-glass. It breaks out of the Bible and becomes real in every age. All around this world, even now, people are meeting the Risen Christ. They meet Him on their own lonely road to wherever they are trying to hide. They meet Him in His people gathered. They meet Him when the words of scripture become a living Hope. They meet Him when they open their hearts to welcome the stranger. And, Sunday by Sunday, they meet Him in the breaking of the bread. Today, may our eyes be opened that we, too, may recognize him – the Ever Living One. May He walk with us when we least expect it. May He bless us on our journey. And, may we, too, ordinary disciples that we are, share the power of His Resurrection Life burning within our hearts. “Risen Lord be known to us in the breaking of the bread.”