

Third Sunday in Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
23 April 2023

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day: Not three weeks after, but on the evening of the resurrection, two of Jesus' disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem: They were returning to their former lives and jobs. Their last three years have ended in absolute failure. In fact, they tell the stranger as much, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." We see here two dispirited men who had lost all hope in the political redemption of Israel. All they can do now is to return to their former lives to try to make sense of it all.

They were talking and discussing with each other about all the things that happened in Jerusalem the last few days: This is what you do when your first confront grief. You tell and retell stories of the person who has died. You remember funny events, moments of great teaching, special meals, and the thousands of memories you have of the person. This is how you process grief. In their case, they also talk about what the death of Jesus will mean for their movement. Will there even be a movement left? If Jesus was not the Messiah, is there someone else they should be waiting for? Could they have missed the signs of the real Messiah? How will they go on after this?

While they were talking, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him: This is fairly common in those days. Travelers join together because the roads are dangerous and there is strength in numbers. Additionally, a bit of conversation and storytelling makes the long journey more enjoyable. Welcoming a friendly stranger would have been quite natural for the disciples. There was something familiar about the stranger and he gave them an opportunity to retell their stories of the beloved friend they had just lost in the city. Their walk with Jesus also evokes memories of Abraham's walk with God in Genesis, Chapter 18. They walk to Sodom, deep in conversation, but Abraham does not recognize God's presence, in the same way the men fail to recognize Jesus. These echoes of Abraham build a connection between God and the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, Jesus himself will make this connection later.

It is difficult to recognize the living Jesus in the midst of the hopelessness of our daily life. When I think of every single milestone in my life, I can point to a war, a famine, an ethnic cleaning of some type, all happening behind the scenes: I came to America during the violence caused in Colombia by the Medellin Cartel, I lived in Belgium during the last days of the Berlin Wall, I was married the same year the Yugoslavia conflict was at its most violent point. I had my first child around the time of the Rwandan genocide, I was in seminary during Katrina and the war on terror, I became

a priest during the era of daily school shootings, and no day has passed by when we haven't heard of more armed conflicts in Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine, and many other parts of the world. How can we recognize Messiah among us when the world is still engulfed in chaos and bloodshed? How is this possible? Well I believe we get some hints about this in this passage today.

Jesus asks them about their conversation and Cleopas answers him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" Here we have several reasons why we see this passage from Luke introduced during the time when the Church reads almost exclusively from the Gospel of John: 1. This passage wants to make clear that Jesus' death and resurrection fit within God's plans revealed in Scripture. He fulfills the Scriptures. 2. This passage makes a sacramental statement: Jesus makes himself present to us in the breaking of bread. Whereas Abraham failed to recognize the Lord during the breaking of bread of the meal Sarah prepared for the strangers, Jesus makes himself known to his friends in the breaking of the bread.

Cleopas says that Jesus was (1.) A mighty prophet mighty in deed and word. (2.) Both God and all the people recognize his grandeur. (3.) He was condemned to death and crucified. (4.) Some women were at the tomb and came back saying they had a vision of angels who said that he was alive. (5.) Some of the disciples confirmed the story of the women, but they don't know what to make of these stories. In other words, neither word from those who saw the empty tomb, nor their understanding of Scripture, was sufficient for them to belief in Jesus' resurrection. For their faith to increase to the point of acceptance, something else needs to happen. They need an encounter with the living Christ because nothing else will be sufficient for them.

It is then that Jesus says, "The Scriptures say clearly that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" At this point, he breaks the Jewish scriptures open, and this will be one two events of "breaking open" that we will see in this passage. Jesus' life and death fits within God's plans for the salvation of the universe, and we can see this clearly in Holy Scripture. And it is here that we will find a lesson for us today. But let us continue with the narrative.

The second point Luke is making is a sacramental one. As they came near the village, the men invite Jesus to stay with them. This too has echoes of Genesis 18. Abraham begs the three strangers to stay for a meal since it was late and they were tired. The disciples say, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." It is at this point that they recognize Jesus. "He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." This is the second time the expression to break open comes on this scene. Jesus breaks open the Scriptures, now Jesus breaks open the bread and they see him. So far, Luke is telling us

that the best way to find the risen Christ among us is through Word and Sacrament. It is by reading Holy Scripture and by breaking bread as he instructed his friends to do. Breaking bread together is an act of fellowship, it is a communal meal. Which means that the often solitary reading of Scripture is only part of the answer. For a full recognition of Jesus among us, we need the communal breaking of bread, we need our brothers and sisters joined together in communion.

Something happens to these disciples when they hear Jesus on the way to Emmaus, and the same thing happens to them as they recognize the risen Christ. Luke tells us that their hearts were burning, in other words, they were bursting open. When Jesus vanishes, the disciples say to one another, “Were not our hearts within us while he was opening the scriptures to us?” After this, they return to Jerusalem where they get confirmation that Jesus had appeared to Simon and to the rest of the disciples. What follows after Jesus’ appearance points to a possible answer to the question I posed above. How can we recognize the living Jesus when the world has not been made right? How do we recognize Jesus when we are surrounded by violence and death?

I am often deeply moved by what Jesus does after he is recognized by his friends; he disappears. He leaves! I find this incredibly sad and hard to understand. There is a theologian by the name of Mark Allen Powel who writes the following in his book, *Loving Jesus* (p.55),

“Somebody once asked me, “What does it feel like to be a Christian?” That seemed like an odd question, but I tried to answer. I said, “It feels like being in love with someone who has gone away.” They said, “That can’t be very pleasant.” Well, no, I don’t think it’s supposed to be pleasant, but it is pretty powerful. I am in love with my wife, and when she is gone, I think about her constantly. I perk up at any news of her and I am energized by the slightest connection (a letter, a phone call). That’s what being a Christian “feels like.” Of course, it is a confident sadness... we love Jesus as a bride loves her groom, but our bridegroom has been taken away from us, and that makes us sad. The love can be real and powerful and overwhelming, but the absence is real too. And, sometimes, it’s just hard. (p. 55, italics in original)

I agree with Powel. Every service of Holy Eucharist makes Christ presence real among us, but it also reminds us of his absence. We receive him, but we also long for him. We fill our hearts with his presence, but we also exclaim “Come, Lord Jesus!” We know that we will be with him fully at some point in the future, but until then, we seek him in Holy Scripture and this table. And then, we do the things he has asked us to do in his memory until we see him again: We love others as he has loved us, we work to build his kingdom, we take care of this fragile earth, we feed and care for those in need, and build this community as we anticipate his return. **Amen!**