

Really Risen

Acts 2:14a, 36-44

Luke 24:13-35

April 23, 2023

Third Sunday of Easter

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Some years ago, the renowned English author G.K. Chesterton was approached by a newspaper reporter on a street corner in London. The reporter said, “Sir, I understand that you recently became a Christian. May I ask you a question?” “Certainly,” Chesterton replied. “Well,” said the reporter, “if the Risen Christ suddenly appeared at this very moment and stood behind you, what would you do?” Chesterton looked the reporter squarely in the eye and answered, “He is.”ⁱ

He is. Merely a figure of speech, wishful thinking, pious sentiment? Not to those who trust the truth of Easter. That Christ is risen is more than a historical memory or a hopeful wish. He is a present reality – here with us now.

For those who believe, he is risen and with us here and now, on a street corner in London, in an office, or car, or class room or ball field, a home or hospital bed in Birmingham. We confess at the heart of our faith that the Jesus of history is the Christ of faith who was raised once and lives by his resurrection power in us here, now, always. That trust is the center of everything and transforms everything.

At Easter we celebrated the great central truth of our faith upon which all else hinges, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. At Easter, Christ defeated death and began for us a new creation, a new world, that is eternal and ongoing, even as it is at work unfolding, making its mark in this storm-filled world. The Resurrection brought meaning and hope and purpose and a future. Throughout the 50 days of the Easter-Tide Season we especially lift up joyously the resurrection reality which shapes all our worship throughout the whole year, as each Lord’s Day worship is a celebration of the resurrection.

The four Gospels each give us appearances of Jesus to the disciples, and other believers, encounters with his friends, in order to renew and confirm their faith in the face of seeming defeat. On Good Friday the dream of the strong young Messiah seemed to have been squelched by the powers of state and status quo religion. On Easter the dream lived again, and took on reality, as the women, then the disciples, then more and more than 500 saw him and trusted the announcement of the angel, “He is not here; for he has been raised as he said.

But how do we come to this faith? How do we come to recognize the Risen Jesus Christ the Lord in our midst? The Emmaus Story beautifully unfolds the startling new reality of resurrection in the lives of two men, and serves as a guide for us in our own faith development and practice, showing us here in this Story the very thing we rehearse and experience Sunday by Sunday- as the Word is read and interpreted and as the Sacraments are Celebrated, and then as we go out to share the Great Story showing that we also may- all these centuries after these two

we read about- find our hearts burning within us as Jesus talks with us along the road of our lives, opens up the scriptures to us, and then sits within us and feeds us at his great banquet table, before sending us out as his messengers with a story to tell “A story to tell to the nations, A story of truth and mercy, a story of peace and light.”ⁱⁱ

I

It is Easter evening, the day after the end of the Passover Sabbath, two of the believers are sadly walking home to Emmaus, a little village about seven miles from Jerusalem. They are despairing, depressed, dejected, mostly confused over the events that have transpired, as they talk over all that has happened.

Suddenly Jesus is walking alongside them, “But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” He is simply a Stranger, a friendly curious Stranger, as he enters into conversation asking what they are discussing. Looking sad, they ask “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place?” Everybody knows what has happened, like after a school shooting or a moon landing, whether a tragedy or a triumph, everybody knows. But this Stranger seems not to know.

Do you stranger not know about these things? Jesus asks simply, “What things,” They reply, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. **But we had hoped** that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

We had hoped, among the saddest of words of tongue or pen or I phone. “We had hoped.” Here is the dashing of a dream, the squelching of desire, the wiping away of hope. For a moment deliverance seemed so close, the parade, the palms, the hosannas, the temple cleansing. Then it was all over. Like the Red Army squelching Tiananmen Square, or the Russian army putting down protests for democracy. **“We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.”** We had hoped this leader, this scientific breakthrough, this vaccine, this song, this hobby, this discovery, would be exactly what we needed. But alas.

“On top of that,” to add to the confusion, in this everything, everywhere, all at once world, they continue, “Some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see.”

Resurrection reality breaks in slowly for these two on the road with the Stranger. Even though conveyed in such dramatic events, they still remain oblivious to what it all meant. Cleophas and his friend had not seen Jesus, and, standing there before him, even now, they do not recognize him.

II

Jesus then takes them to task, for their slow perception. **“O, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that**

the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” John Calvin says of their lack of perception,

“They are so slow that Jesus Christ had to reproach them for being blockheaded people with no faith, for having minds so heavy and thick that they understand nothing.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus the Stranger briefly states how this was no accident but necessary to fulfill God’s own purpose, and plan. The Father had to allow his Son to suffer, endure death, and then to defeat death by his glorious victory.

This Stranger then shares with them for about four hours as they walk, from the Hebrew Scriptures beginning with Moses and the prophets, the developments of God’s plans and purpose up to and including himself. Can you imagine what it would be like to be in a four-hour Bible Study led Jesus? WOW! He points out the way how the narrative unfolds, the necessity of all that had gone before, and then describes his own role in it. They hear audibly, yet their ears are not open. They do not really hear. They still do not connect the dots.

When we want to know about God where do we turn? Mountains and seacoasts, they are beautiful. Philosophers and historians, they can help us discern certain patterns across the earth’s development. Science and mathematics, these can help us appreciate the delicate balance that exists on earth within which human life is possible.

Yet to know God, to really encounter and have a relationship with God we must move beyond these hints to Scripture itself, to the revelation of God’s unfolding mighty acts. As we seek to grow as disciples of Jesus we must ever and again turn to the Scriptures and ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten our understanding. That is why we turn to this Book every Sunday and declare it to be the Word of the Lord. We must sit beneath the Scriptures and allow them to penetrate us. Jesus does this for Cleopas and his friend.

III

Do you know what it is like to have a deep heart-to-heart intimate conversation with a friend? The time just flies by, you do not notice the clock, and suddenly hours have passed. When Kenny Lewis and I first met to talk about our music position here that he so ably fills we became so engrossed in our conversation at the restaurant that three hours passed at the table as if a matter of seconds. As Jesus and the men, come to the village, a journey of some four hours, with all this tutoring by Jesus, He seems as if he will walk on by. But they do not want him to leave. Stay with us, they say. For supper. **“Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over.”** He accepts their invitation.

Next scene shows us the three of them seated at a dinner table. Words of the Psalmist come to mind, **“Thou prepares a table for me.”** I read somewhere that the three most popular words a child hears in the evening are, “Supper is ready.” A table is set before them, a meal is prepared. And then another surprise, the Stranger invited as a guest at dinner becomes the host. He is seated at the place of honor. They know at least they have a learned rabbi among them.

Then it happens, the Eucharistic actions. A meal that is more than a meal. The same actions as on that Thursday night. **“He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.”** Look at the various accounts of meals in the New Testament, and you will see those meals have hints of the Eucharist in them, like the feeding of the 5000, like Jesus feeding Peter and other disciples’ breakfast along the shore of Galilee. like Paul praying over food on a ship in the storm. In all of them you will find these similar elements, **taking, blessing, breaking, giving.**

Here is a picture of how Jesus takes up ordinary things of life; friendship, food, laughter, fear, faith, courage, trust, he takes these up and offers blessing over them. He prays to the Father over them and then he breaks what he has, even as he allowed his own body to be broken for us. The bread must be broken, the seed must be planted and die to its old form, in order to sprout in a new form and spread to all, in order for us to be fed. Jesus the guest must become Jesus the host.

Then comes the key moment. It is, in the breaking of the bread, that **“their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”** And instantly he is gone. Revealed, known, but not contained. He has gone. He goes on ahead of them, as he continues to do over those 40 days, coming and going, appearing and disappearing, then gone a final time, ascending back to his Father, not in order to be separated from them and us, but in order to be present with us always by his Spirit.

IV

Suddenly in the breaking of the bread they recognize who he is, and they say, **“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”** When we recognize Jesus for who he is there is a sort of electric surge moment flowing through our body. A warm feeling. Our hearts burn within us with warmth, love, joy, peace, hope. John Calvin portrayed this in his own personal shield, a burning heart in a open hand and the inscription, **“My heart I offer to you Lord, promptly and sincerely.”**

Cleopas and his friend instantly now recognize they have been with Jesus. They are so overwhelmed and inspired that that very night they jump up and race back those seven miles to Jerusalem arriving around midnight to tell the other disciples and their friends, who are still up pondering all that has happened, saying to one another, **“The Lord has risen indeed.” He has appeared to Simon.** Now Cleopas and his friend add their testimony, declaring, “He has appeared to us as well, we saw him on the road he taught us, we ate with him. We recognized him for who he is at the table. **“In the breaking of the bread.” The Living Word Jesus Christ, risen and alive, became known in the bread and impelled us to come and tell you. He is risen indeed!**

A portion of “A Declaration of Faith” that was developed by the PCUS Southern Presbyterian Church, declares,

“Christ makes himself known to us in the breaking of bread.
He offers us his body broken for our sake and his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins. We accept his promises and gifts and depend on his life to sustain ours.

In turn we offer ourselves in thanksgiving to the risen Lord who has conquered death. So we celebrate his victory here and now and anticipate the joyous feast in his coming kingdom. Reunited around one loaf and cup, we receive strength and courage to continue our pilgrimage with God in the world. Jesus is Lord. He has been Lord from the beginning. He will be Lord at the end. Even now he is Lord.”

IV

Recognizing him, we go forth to be his presence in the world, to be salt and light in an otherwise zestless, tasteless, dark and dying world. His resurrection tells us, this world matters, it needs us, Christ’s body, to burn more brightly with Christ in our hearts with his love visible in our lives. “So, let our lips and lives express, the Holy Gospel we profess.”

Thus, it has gone for 2000 years. 2023 is actually the 2000th year anniversary. One we welcomed recently here at South Highland who shared resurrection hope amid vast suffering and death is Dr. Ivan Rusyn, president of the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary in Kyiv, Ukraine. Here is some of his grateful response for our generous support and that of others expressed to the Outreach Foundation Board last week, which I now share with you.

Dear friends from the Outreach Foundation: Greetings from Ukraine, from the city of Bucha. I am right now in my hometown, in my apartment, and I am happy to have a chance to speak to you. First of all, I would like to say thank you for your generosity and global vision. Thank you for your support. Because of your support, thousands of lives have been touched by the gospel and love. We have been able to restore a lot of things in our campus, which was hit by the Russian missiles. Special thank you for a generator that you provided for us. It helped us a lot.

I want to say a special thank you for the exceptional, extraordinary hospitality my wife and I experienced when we visited you just a few months ago. It was kind of a healing experience for us to visit in your churches and to spend time with many of you. We were blessed. As you know, Mark Mueller, Tom Boone and Vic Petrenko were brave enough to visit us here in Kiev in Bucha. We were happy to spend a few days together, and for my team and me, it was a great encouragement. As you know, we believe in incarnational mission and mission to presence. So your presence means a lot for us.

And I have to pass appreciation from our soldiers. As you know, your team brought about 700 IFAKs [triage kits]. Some of them we shared with soldiers that stayed with us. But most of them goes to the frontline, to the city of Bakhmut, Kramatorsk and Slavyansk. And our soldiers are amazed by the quality and also by your care. So thank you for supporting us.

And I want to ask you to keep praying for us, keep supporting us, and please be our voice before your society and your government. May God bless your board, your staff, and every partner that generously support you and, through you,

support Ukraine. We need your friendship. We need partnership with you. May God bless you. Amen.

Two disciples, after a slow steady walk through lonely places outside Jerusalem, hear a Stranger open the Scriptures about the Law, the Prophets, the Wisdom writings, and about the things concerning himself. Then as they are seated with him at table, suddenly in the breaking of bread they recognize Him as the Risen Christ and are forever changed.

As St. Augustine observes,

“Jesus broke the bread, they recognized Him. Then we should no longer say that we do not know Christ! If we believe, we know Him! Indeed, if we believe, we have Him! They had Christ at their table; we have Him in our souls!”^{iv}

Prayers; “Our hearts we offer you Lord, promptly and sincerely, Amen.”

ⁱ Brennan Manning, Abba's Child, p.99

ⁱⁱ The Hymnbook, “We’ve A Story to Tell to the Nations”, p.504

ⁱⁱⁱ John Calvin, Matthew and Gospel Synoptics, vol. 3., p. 186

^{iv} St. Augustine, Sermon 232, VII,7, Quoted by Pope Benedict XVI, The Faith, p.94