

Easter 3A April 6, 2008  
Leesburg Presbyterian Church  
Diane Hutchins

Acts 3:11-19  
Luke 24: 13-35

Wondrous God, present with us even when we do not know it, help us to always be expectant, and eager to be met by you. Give us open minds, open eyes, open hearts to receive your word and your gracious presence. Give us the courage to repeat to all who will listen that we have seen the Lord. Amen

Last week we heard John's story about how Jesus came to the disciples in the growing darkness at the end of that first Easter day. Today, we hear an account from Luke about what happened during the daylight hours. Luke gives us two scenes in which disciples encounter the Risen Christ. In both, Jesus appears unexpectedly, he teaches them and then they eat—bread in the first story, fish in the second.

Considering the amazing story that Luke has to tell, it is all very low key. Both stories are very private affairs—first to just two unknown disciples on the road going out of Jerusalem, and then to a group gathered together back in Jerusalem—all in the family. It's as if the gospel writer wants to make sure his readers don't think this is the time when "people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world for the powers of the heavens will be shaken and they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:26-27). Jesus had said to expect that, but this wasn't that. No PR man got hold of this story and pumped it up with the kind of exaggerated adjectives and expressions of amazement that the story really deserves. This is how the first witnesses got the story and how they told it.

Let's join the two disciples on the road and listen to Luke's telling of the first encounter. Luke 24:13-35.

### Telling the Story

I don't know what more I can say. Luke does such a great job of telling this story. It's so simple and so clear. As a short story, it is so concisely constructed—full of suspense and drama and a climatic "aha" moment when everything becomes clear. We have two people on the road. We don't know anything about this one called, Cleopas, and the other disciple doesn't even get a name. (I always wondered if it may have been his wife.) We don't know why they are going to Emmaus. They may be going home after keeping the Passover in Jerusalem. Or, perhaps they were returning home after weeks on the road following Jesus along on his journey toward Jerusalem. We know it is Sunday—but perhaps we forget that means it was the first day of the work week in this culture; not yet a day of religious observance, but the day when every one

returns to work. They are trudging back to work after a long, disappointing holiday weekend in the city.

A stranger meets them on the road and travels with them for a time. He elicits from them their story—their hopes and their disillusionment after the events of that week. Have you ever sat on an airplane or a bus or a lunch counter and found yourself hearing more than you ever wanted to know about the person next to you? (Or found yourself telling more than you had ever intended to say?) I wonder if Cleopas felt safe telling this story because Jesus had been crucified and nothing seemed to matter anymore. Or, if he worried that this might be a temple spy looking for “un-indicted co-conspirators”? Perhaps he didn’t much care and didn’t really look up—he just needed to rehearse the story for his own memory—to hear the words said out loud to give them more solidity, a firmer reality, than merely the thoughts whirling around inside his head. Maybe he didn’t much care who might be listening.

Sometimes as we begin casual introductions—what were you talking about before I interrupted? Oh of course, the trials and execution in the city this weekend—yes, yes. We were directly involved. We were his disciples. We know all about it. And we hear Cleopas say to the stranger, “Are you the only one who doesn’t know?” But we know the *other* is the only one who really does know—*everything*. Cleopas tells the empty tomb story, but whatever it might mean, that wasn’t enough to keep them in Jerusalem. An empty tomb wasn’t enough to revive their spirits or resuscitate their hopes.

So Jesus begins to teach them. It says he started with Moses—back to Bethlehem wouldn’t be enough, they had to go back to the beginning—back to the ABC’s—in order to help them to understand all that had happened. They knew the scriptures—but Jesus helped them to hear the old familiar words in a new way. He helped them to look deeper into what was already there—what they already knew. It says he opened the scriptures to them. What they saw had always been there, but there was more to see. Opened scriptures opened their minds. When they get to where they are going, they urge the stranger to stay with them. That Middle Eastern hospitality demanded that they offer and he refuse, and they offer more firmly until the stranger agrees to become their guest. And when they come to the table, somehow the guest becomes the host, and takes the bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them. And suddenly all becomes clear. Their eyes are opened and they see what had been there before them all day. And **that** was enough to revive their spirits and resuscitate their hopes and they **ran** all the way back to Jerusalem to tell.

On a level just beneath the telling of what happened on that first Easter Day, Luke is also telling the first century church—his original audience—what it will take for the church to succeed. Disciples will have to leave Jerusalem. The story has to get out of the holy city—we’re coming to the place where the Risen Christ will say to them, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Disciples must be on the road, going someplace. We can’t really find a place called Emmaus on the maps from that time period. The road to Emmaus is just the way. It’s the road that matters, not the destination. In Acts, Luke will tell us that the first Christians were called—“The people of the Way.”

A discouraged man named Cleopas—not one of the twelve, not a major player in the original story—is on the road telling what he knows about the events that happened in Jerusalem to his companion. He doesn't understand completely, he just tells what he knows. What if he is not rehearsing the story for his own benefit, but telling everything he saw to the other disciple? What happens if Cleopas is passing on the story to the next generation—if the other disciple is not a friend or his wife, but rather is his son? Perhaps a youngster who had been in Jerusalem, but, somehow missed all that the father had experienced--maybe too overwhelmed with the excitement of a first trip to the big city, or too enchanted with the company of other young people, or just confused and mostly ignored while the grown-ups scurried around and tried to figure out what was happening? Those who experienced holy week for themselves had to tell it to their families, to their children and all their households. The church has always been just one generation away from extinction. But until they meet the Risen Christ along the road, it is a story of disappointment and despair, not much worth repeating. But, the church will be a group of people on a road where, wonder of wonders, the Risen Christ will meet them; and help them to see more than they had seen before. The Risen Christ changes the story from a story about suffering and death to a story about new life and new hope—and that is the story worth telling over and over again to the ends of the earth.

The church is where pain and sadness can be shared; and where we can listen for the voice of God to lead us forward down the road, applying scripture to what we have experienced individually and as a community. If the Risen Christ is invited to stay, we can experience his presence at the table. We can hear the memories of those who experienced the Last Supper so clearly, that when we repeat the words, “Jesus took bread and after he blessed it, he broke it, and gave it to them;” we can live into the memory of actually being one of those who heard him say, “This is my body broken for you. Take. Eat. Do this to remember.” And eyes will be opened and it will all become clear.

And the story keeps on working in individual lives 2,000 years farther down the road. Frederick Buechner suggests that the road to Emmaus is anywhere you go to escape<sup>1</sup>, a bigger mall or the local bar or to the refrigerator. It's wherever you go to throw up your hands in despair and scream that there is nothing to believe in anymore, that there is no hope and no meaning in anything.

What happens to the story if the other disciple on the road with Cleopas is not a friend, or his wife, or his son? What happens to the story if the other disciple in the story is you? We listen in dismay to the story that he has to tell: a story of suffering and death and loss and a curiously empty tomb. The story is interesting, but who cares what happened so long ago. And then suddenly someone else comes along who helps you to understand what the story is trying to say. But it's just a story until disciples begin to discover all that the events mean for their own lives. That's what the church is trying to do—to make meaning out of our everyday experience, to open your eyes so you notice the Risen Christ walking with you. You may just get a glimpse, but it's enough for you to believe that there is more to see. You think maybe you're finally getting it—just maybe you can understand what it all means. But you know that it's not quite clear—you squint your eyes and try to bring it into focus—but you have to believe there is something there to see before you will work hard enough to make it happen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966) 85-85.

You invite the stranger on the road to stay—you actually have to call out to him that you need him to stay, that you want desperately to see clearly.

In the Old Testament, Job says, “Look, God passes by me and I do not see him. He moves on, but I do not perceive him” (Job 9:11).

But Jesus says, “Listen, I am standing at the door knocking, if you hear my voice and open the door, I’ll come in to you and eat with you and you with me” (Rev 3:20).

So, we prepare the table with the bread baked by human hands and grapes squeezed by our efforts, taken from the grass of the field and the fruit of the vine that God created and gave to us; and we recognize that Jesus is not the guest, but the host at the table. We come to the table to remember and experience for ourselves the love and acceptance of a God who was willing to do anything for us. And you are invited to take him in. To ingest the body of Christ as we ingest the life-giving air around us. Do this to remember. Do this to open your eyes. Do this to believe. This is what will revive your spirits and resuscitate your hopes. Take. Eat. Believe, and you will see.