

Grace Episcopal Church, Jefferson City

Third Sunday of Easter

April 23, 2023

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Two followers of Jesus walked to a village about seven miles west of Jerusalem. They stayed there a while, and then rushed seven miles back to Jerusalem. It was a short trip, both in distance and in time. But it was a remarkable trip. It was one of those trips that *changes* your life, and you talk about it for the *rest* of your life. The story of the journey to Emmaus has amazed and encouraged people for two thousand years. And here's why: it's an Easter Season gospel story.

Yes, of course, it is a journey story, a pilgrimage story. It has a mystery, a stranger in disguise who is finally recognized at a big reveal at the end. And yes, it's a miracle story, a resurrection story. But it's more than all of that. The story of the trip to Emmaus is good news for right now. The Risen savior abides with his followers. The risen Christ makes himself present to us. Easter is become Eucharist. There's hope for us all, even now.

We have not been left alone. We are not like sheep without a shepherd, like those who have no hope. The risen Christ walks with us. He hasn't left. He answers our questions and confronts our anxieties. Our hearts burn within us, and we come to realize that we have a job, a message, something to rush back to town and tell others about. The risen, resurrected, Easter savior is alive, and he comes alongside us, helps us to understand, and offers us hope.

You all know this. Luke has made it very clear. Two disciples were on their way to Emmaus, talking about all that had happened during the previous week. They were discussing "things about Jesus of Nazareth," how he was "a prophet, mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." They were also talking about how "the chief priests and leaders had handed [Jesus] over to the authorities to be crucified." It dashed their dreams. "We had hoped that he was the one, the one to redeem Israel." And they were repeating the rumors, how the women had gone to the tomb and not found the body of Jesus. Where was Jesus? Where is Jesus present?

Cleopas and his friend were walking and talking about their week, trying to make sense of it, and as they were doing that, Jesus joined them. It's what He does: He comes to meet people who are doing what those two were doing. The Risen Christ comes alongside disciples who are talking about him, people trying to make sense of what they know about God in Christ, what they're experiencing, what they're longing for

Jesus appeared and asked, "What are you guys talking about?" The question shocked Cleopas and his friend. They stopped in their tracks, and they were sad. They reacted authentically and honestly to this stranger, and in return the stranger offered to help them. The stranger began to explain what that happened during the past week, the week that turned out to be the first Holy Week. He told them, "'The prophets have always said that the Messiah would suffer, and then enter into glory.' And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he unpacked and explained for them what the scriptures said about Himself." Think about that: The Risen Christ told the travellers his own theology of salvation. Want to know what Jesus of Nazareth thinks about God's salvation? It's right here, in two points: (1) salvation requires a savior to die. We cannot avoid what happened on Good Friday. And (2) salvation is assured by the empty grave. Good Friday was confirmed on Easter Sunday.

Here's something else: All that happened to Jesus during the first Holy Week made sense in terms of their shared religious tradition. Jesus comprehended and explained his own betrayal, death, and resurrection according to the ancient holy stories of the Suffering Servant, and the valley full of

dry bones that come back to life. Jesus found his self-image in the pages of the writings of the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, and he lifted out two strands from within those larger traditions to explain his own ministry. He lifted out parts of their historical faith to make sense of all that the three of them had shared during the past week. It's what the Risen Christ does. It's what the Church ought to be doing, making sense out of people's experience with the risen Christ on the basis of the shared tradition.

They didn't get it at first. They couldn't. Cleopas and his friend couldn't grasp all that the stranger was saying, even though it was all about him and he was the one explaining it. They were sluggish, slow to grasp what this fellow traveller was saying. They didn't understand until they got to Emmaus. It was only there, at that place, gathered around a table and sharing a meal, that they got it. The Risen Christ took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, and their eyes were opened. They comprehended. In that simple yet sacred act of breaking bread with the Risen Lord, everything became clear: their tradition, their recent experience, their hopes for the future. They "recognized" the Risen Lord.

That's where it happens, still: around a table. We recognize the Risen Christ in our Holy Meal, the meal that pulls together and makes comprehensible all of our efforts to understand Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection, his ascension, and his mission for us now, and his promise to return. The Holy Meal brings recognition, comprehension. It's where the risen Christ arrives! We have communion with Him, with God, with each other, and our lives start to make sense; our hopes come into focus; our mission becomes clear

Then Jesus disappears. The travelers recognized him at the table, and then He "vanished from their sight." And that's what the risen Christ still does. He meets us, but not on our terms. He is revealed to us, but on his own conditions, not ours. Christ offers his presence, and we go to where he is, how he is. We avail ourselves of his presence, and that's where we understand, where our hearts burn within us. That's where our hopes start to solidify, and we start to think about sharing those hopes with others. Jesus grants us His presence freely, as pure gift, and we go there and we start to recognize Him, to comprehend what he's up to. In the presence of the risen Christ we are strengthened, and encouraged, and bound together, and empowered for ministry. And it all happens in his presence, on his terms.

That's how the risen Christ meets us this morning. Across time and space; remotely over the internet and through Spiritual Communion, as well as here, in this place; as all of us are walking along the dusty roads of our lives. We recognize him around this table, on his terms. Yes we recognize him through our glances and gestures, though our laughter together. But we also recognize him through this beautiful music, and in the ancient liturgy; in the bread and the wine. The risen Christ meets us here and holds us in his divine presence across the miles and across the ages. It's the good news of Emmaus. It's the Easter gospel. Alleluia! Amen!