

"Burning Hearts and Easter"

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May 1, 2011
Luke 24: 13-35

Luke tells of the appearances of Christ with great detail. These details in the story were preserved and included because they give us some clues as to how God interacts with us. That's really what a large part of the Bible is - a collection of stories of human beings and their encounters with God. These stories are presented almost like a travel guide to us to alert us as to what we might expect from God on the journeys of our lives. Let's take a look at Luke 24:13-35.

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "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. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, 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 that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was

alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, 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?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The Road to Emmaus is a story for all time - but especially for our time. For we too have heard rumors of resurrection. That's what makes this ancient story a thoroughly modern story.

The story involves two disciples on a 7 mile journey. It's not a 6 mile journey, not 8 miles, but 7 miles. That's the Bible's way of saying, "This really happened. Pay attention." Luke doesn't present this story as a legend or a myth - "Long ago in a galaxy far, far away." No. He says there were two disciples, the day was Sunday, and it's 7 miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. And while these two disciples were taking that walk, Jesus comes up and walks with them. And they don't recognize him, which is a bit odd, especially when you consider what they've been talking

about him!

"What are you guys discussing?"

"Jesus of Nazareth."

"Interesting. Tell me more."

"Are you the only guy in town who hasn't heard?"

That tells us that Jesus was the talk of the town that week. Jesus Palm Sunday parade into town was seen by many. He then overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple, which would have been widely talked about, and then he teaches for 3 more days in the temple courts, as the opposition mounted and finalized their plans. And of course his tragic and horrific death had left so many stunned and almost paralyzed. So much so that when Jesus asks them, *"What are you talking about?"* - they just stopped in their tracks - *"they stood still, looking sad."* They're overcome with grief and confusion - *"we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel."*

The Risen Christ is right before their very eyes and they don't recognize him. And isn't that just like us? This is God's World, and it's a reflection of our Creator. This is God's World and it's infused with the Presence of our Creator. And yet we often have a hard time seeing that.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it this way: *"Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; But only those who see, take off their shoes - the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."*

Some years ago I served a church that had Bean Suppers. I'm so glad that's not a part of the program here, because I really don't like baked beans. And I always felt bad when the workers would sit down afterwards and eat together - and they'd offer me beans. I'd say, "No Thanks. I'm on a low-bean diet." Or, "Do you know that the Book of Leviticus actually forbids baked beans."

Well, one day I was sitting in my office and someone called and asked if

they could have their wedding in the room where we held our Bean Suppers. I said, "That is a nice room (next door in our Fellowship Hall), but have you considered having the wedding in our church?" The person said, "Where's that?" I hesitated. "It's the building you see when you leave the Fellowship Hall." And they'd missed it. Don't we all do that sometimes? There's so much beauty around us, so much goodness in the people we share our lives with, so much that points us to God, so much that reflects the glory of God; and yet we often have a hard time seeing it.

Jesus is walking side by side with these two disciples and they don't even know it. Of course, that's strangely comforting, isn't it? It means that God isn't bound by our poor vision, our limited understanding or our lack of awareness. Christ is walking with us even when we think we're traveling alone. God is closer than we think.

Well, Jesus wants these two disciples to experience the miracle of Easter, and not just hear rumors of it. And so he has a Bible Study with them on the road to Emmaus - he's got 7 miles to do it. Plenty of time! And so he talks with them about God reaching out to humanity - through Moses and the commandments, through the prophets and their teachings. He reminds them of the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures that pointed to the coming of the Messiah. The Scriptures all point to him. Later they would say that their hearts were burning within them as he talked about these things on the road. They felt so alive. They no longer felt alone and in despair. And they know it's coming from within him. God's Eternal Flame is burning within Jesus and they are catching the sparks.

Well, when they get to their village - Mile # 7 - Jesus keeps on walking ahead. And they have to invite him to stay with them. They *"urged him strongly"* it says, *"Stay with us."* There's an important spiritual truth there - the God who walks with us always, still awaits our invitation - to a closer walk and a deeper fellowship. *"Behold I stand at the door and knock,"* says Jesus in the Book of Revelation.

In St. Paul's Cathedral in London there's a famous painting by Holman

Hunt. It's of Christ knocking on a door. He's depicted in a stately, kingly robe and crown. The glorious Savior is knocking. When you examine the painting closely you see that there's no handle on the outside of the door. Before the painting was displayed for the public, Hunt invited a few close friends to privately view his work. One friend exclaimed, "Why Holman, you forgot to paint a latch on the door!" To which the artist replied, *"No, the only latch on that door is on the inside. It cannot be opened from without."*

Christ waits for us to open the door. He doesn't barge in. He doesn't impose himself upon us. He awaits our invitation. *"Come, live in me. Make your home in me."*

And so on that first Easter they invited him in. He sat at their table with them to share a meal - another sign of their desire to have a deeper fellowship with him. *"And while at the table," it says, "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him."* Did the breaking of bread remind them of the Last Supper? Did it remind them of the Feeding of the 5000, when also took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them? Or did they see the scars on his hands? - scars that he would later show Doubting Thomas. We don't know for sure. All we know is they recognized him.

As a pastor I find it very meaningful that their hearts burned within them through the teachings of the scriptures, and they recognized him at a table where he broke bread with them. The church carries on these true and trusted ways of encountering Christ - through the Word and the Sacrament.

Of course this encounter with Christ and the two disciples ends in a strange way, doesn't it? As soon as they recognize him, Jesus vanishes from their sight. What do you make of that? - Please discuss!

It certainly illustrates how faith and doubt go hand in hand. "Now you see him, now you don't." In spite of all our doctrines, creeds and even

sacred scripture, faith still requires faith. As author Philip Yancy writes:

"Doubt always coexists with faith, for in the presence of certainty who would need faith at all? God's invisibility guarantees that I will experience times of doubt."

Jesus suddenly becoming invisible makes the same point. That's part of what makes this story a story for our time - it allows for the mystery of God, a God you just can't pin down. He wouldn't stay nailed to a Cross. He couldn't be held by a tomb. He can't remain in any box we put God in.

I believe with all my heart that these two disciples saw Jesus alive and it changed their lives forever. It changed the course of history forever. They changed the ancient world. They changed the Roman world. They changed the Western World. And they've influenced the entire world! A tiny band of followers changed the world because they met the Risen Christ. Perhaps all they got was a glimpse - but that's all they needed. And that's what faith often is this side of heaven - glimpses of God - beautiful, sacred glimpses of our Creator and of our Savior's love.

Of course, The Resurrection is more than a glimpse of God. Easter is the glory of God revealed - a glory that triumphs not only over the grave, over human sin and injustice, a glory that is eternal.

May you see that glory today - in the sacred meal, in our time together and in one another.

May your heart burn within you with Holy Wonder and Sacred Fire.

On the journey of your life may you have Emmaus Moments where he walks with you and breaks bread with you, and you celebrate the comfort and joy of his companionship.

Amen.