

**On the Road to Emmaus**  
(Luke 24:13-35)

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Today is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Easter, so already a little time has passed since we celebrated the resurrection and we've all moved on to whatever comes next. But the followers of Jesus in today's Gospel story are still in the immediate aftermath of the Resurrection. It is still Easter Sunday on the first ever Easter day. And they are still scratching their heads and trying to figure out what happened and what it means.

I'm grateful for the chance to revisit Easter Day and for their lack of understanding, because even though I've been through 6 decades of Easter Sundays, I still find myself scratching my head each year and wondering whether maybe I didn't quite get it either. And so I'm thankful not only for our visit last week with Thomas and the disciples in the Upper Room, but also that we get to tag along with Cleopas and his travelling buddy on the road to Emmaus today and see how the day played out for them.

Emmaus is 7 miles from Jerusalem, which doesn't seem like a rigorous distance to travel in the course of a day, so they probably had plenty of time to talk about the morning's events and to ponder them. And somewhere along the way the Resurrected Jesus shows up and joins

them in conversation. He asks them what they are talking about. They pause and look at him sadly, and then tell him about the things that led up to Jesus's crucifixion and death and of their hope that Jesus would have been the one to redeem them. And they tell him about the reports of the women, that he has been raised.

You can tell by their words that they are somewhat skeptical and confused. And the sad look on their faces tells us that their conversation is leading in the direction of putting the whole idea of Jesus as their Savior and his resurrection behind them; to chalk it up as a disappointment. Their being on the road itself, seems like a way to put it all behind them.

For us who are hearing this story, there is an incredible irony at play here. The two men are looking directly at and talking to the resurrected Jesus himself, and they don't recognize him as the very person they are talking about.

This failure to recognize Jesus is the continuation of a theme in the Easter story that starts at the entrance to the tomb early that morning, when Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. And it continued in last

week's Gospel, when Thomas failed to recognize him until Jesus invited him to explore the wounds on his body.

In that story we were given the profound clue that we too may come to recognize Jesus by finding the courage to explore the wounds on his body; in other words, the wounds on the world, that disfigure the lives of others and ourselves.

This morning's story provides us with more clues to how we too can come to recognize the Risen Christ as he comes to us. This time it is Cleopas and his travelling buddy who fail to recognize him. And our question again is, "What happens in this story that causes the scales to fall from their eyes so that they can recognize him?"

It's not just any old question. It's also my question and probably your question, because I'm guessing that, if we are honest about it, there will have been times for all of us when, even on Easter Sunday, we have said to ourselves, "If he showed up today, I don't think I recognized him. You may have even felt disappointed, and after the journey of a week or two, it may have seemed that all the Easter hubbub was in the rearview mirror and we were back to living like there is no resurrection and he is not really here.

And that disappointment appears to be caused by the fact that recognizing the Risen Christ depends on information that normal eyesight can't provide. And so, we look to scripture for clues beyond normal eyesight that will help us recognize when he is present. And these Post Easter stories give us that information.

### **Burning Hearts as Scripture is unfolded**

There are two things that lead Cleopas and his companions to recognize Jesus after he joins them on the road. The first is that he interprets scripture with them. He enters the conversation where it starts for all of us on this road of life, with the discouragement we find when our hopes for redemption are dashed. And he engages us in a conversation with scripture. It is a conversation that causes our hearts to burn within us. Not heartburn. But a good kind of burning!

It should be noted here that scripture is making a very practical suggestion that we can follow up on. Where two or ore are gathered and engaging in Bible Study in a way that allows Jesus to unfold its meaning for us, gives us the "burning hearts" with which we can recognize his presence in our midst.

I know that for some of you Bible Study has not been a helpful experience. Not everyone has the same learning style. And doing it well requires humility and patience on everyone's part. Unfortunately, Bible study is a great place for Bible show-offs to showcase their knowledge. It's also a great place for people who would rather talk about what interests them. So, without a shared humility and patience and a willingness to stick with it, Bible study can be easily derailed.

But I have always found the effort worthwhile. Because through reflecting together on scripture, we can be touched by Jesus in a way that make our hearts burn and connects us with his power to save us and our world. That burning in our hearts is a key way in which we recognize his presence.

### **Hospitality**

But there is still another step in the journey and another clue that leads Cleopas and his companion to recognize Jesus as the one who has been with them along the road. As the evening draws near and they are still on the road, Cleopas and his friend invite Jesus to stay overnight with them. And when they are at dinner, Jesus again breaks bread with them. The three of them eat together, and it is then that they fully recognize him.

We recognize this part of the story as a kind of repeat of what Jesus did during the Last Supper. And in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the meal, Cleopas and his friend see Jesus himself before their very eyes. And so we can take as a clue, that it is in these situations when people partake of God's blessings together in this way, that Jesus is present.

But it is also important to notice here that something critical had to happen before the meal. Cleopas and his friend had to first extend the invitation to Jesus to stay with them. They called out to him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is evening and the day is nearly over."

This invitation was critical, because without it, Jesus would have continued on his way and they would perhaps never know who it was they had spent the day with. They would not have had the confirmation in their own experience that "He is Risen, Indeed."

What this suggests to us is the importance of "hospitality" as something that is central to our faith. Just as, at the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples in an act of hospitality; soothing their feet, dirty and aching from whatever journey they had been on, Cleopas and his friend, when they saw Jesus walking away into the evening along the

dusty road, felt the strong impulse to call him back, to invite him to put up his aching feet and rest with them and break bread with them in their night's lodging on the road to Emmaus.

The more I think about this moment, the more it is clear that hospitality is a precursor to seeing Christ revealed. When we extend an invitation to others and treat them with a show of hospitality, the stage is set. In other words, in those moments when we recognize how the journey of life is taking a toll on another, we have an opportunity to respond with an act of hospitality and in so doing, we welcome Christ into our midst.

I don't think that when Cleopas and his friend invite Jesus to stay with them that their show of hospitality is a small detail. It is a pivotal moment. In fact, the inability to show hospitality to others seems to me to always be the first step down the long tragic road that leads from disappointment to hard feelings and misunderstandings, to estrangement, to suspicion and accusations, and finally to senseless violence. And conversely it seems to me that timely expressions of kindness and hospitality are what put us on the road that leads to life and love and wholeness.

One of the realities of our world today is that hospitality seems more risky. There is a lot of suspicion and mistrust in the air. And because of this, the willingness to show hospitality to strangers is all the more needed. And our Gospel reading today holds out the tantalizing promise that, by our attention to Jesus as he comes to us in scripture and by extending our hospitality to strangers, we will meet and see the Risen Lord for ourselves, and we will be the true servants of God's healing love that we seek to be.

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