

SERMON - "THE WALK TO EMMAUS" – APRIL 6, 2008

LECTIONARY READINGS

LUKE 24: 13-35

The walk to Emmaus is my favorite account of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. I have spent some time struggling with why that is so and I have come to the conclusion that it is because it is how I most often experience Jesus' presence in my life. It is often the case that when I've been stewing over something, and trying to figure out what has happened and what to do next, that God sneaks up on me and begins to speak. It may be when I'm having conversations with another person, or it may be in talking to myself, but all of a sudden, like on that road to Emmaus, there is another voice speaking.

Today's gospel lesson is another account of what has happened on that first Sunday morning. We are reminded that for the followers of Jesus it was the day AFTER the Sabbath like MONDAY morning for us. Everything in the world around them was returning so completely to normal that it was impossible to believe that Jesus' life or his death was going to make any difference to the world at all. They were suddenly afraid that the whole business of his life had not added up to much, Hence what had their lives amounted to. Here they had invested precious time to following this man. They had found themselves dreaming about what Israel would be like under this man's leadership. Suddenly it all seems for nought. Their dreams were over, Their leader dead, The world about them went on functioning as it had before they had met him. Gone was the childish faith notion that life is all on the upswing when we have followed in faith.

He had made great promises and great claims and a number of people had placed all their greatest hopes in him. But now he was dead. Of course, there were the rumors about the empty tomb, but could they risk basing new hope on idle rumors?

No. For at least two of the followers there was nothing to do but get out of town. And where did they go? They went to Emmaus. Really no place in particular and probably the only reason they headed there was that it was away from Jerusalem: Away from the place of their grief and pain.

That road to Emmaus is a familiar one to all of us. Who of us here has not sought to step away from a situation or go even further and attempt to totally escape when despairing or disappointed or frightened?

Where do you duck out to when it all gets to be too much? Do you go for a walk or a drive. Out to the movies, into a bar, or straight to the mall for a shopping spree? Do you have a friend who is always there to listen? Emmaus can be many places in our lives, It can even be coming to church, or getting very involved in a project or mission in order to stop thinking about the pain. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget what the world so often does to our ideals. It's where we go when the people we have trusted disappoint us.

Emmaus is where these two persons, unknown to us otherwise, go to forget about Jesus, and to put away their pain. As they walk they are trying to sort it all out. Indeed, stepping out of a situation is not all bad. There are times when we need to remove ourselves just far enough away to get a new perspective. "Timeout" in the midst of an argument can be the most healing moments.

However, we need to intend to return. There are people, I'm sure you've met some, and maybe even you can name a time when you have attempted to live your whole life in a mode of escape. In the case of these two men we can hardly know whether or not they intended to return to Jerusalem. Without Jesus encountering them along the way, it is doubtful that they would have turned around.

You know what I find special about this story? It's the lack of the dramatic In the birth stories, we've got angels and heavenly hosts, and flashing lights, but in the resurrection stories and especially this one, there is none of that. Here, for instance we have two men walking along a dusty road to a town that no one has heard of, suddenly aware of a stranger overtaking them. They sounded annoyed that he interrupted them. At first, they didn't recognize him: not his appearance, not his voice, or any of his mannerisms, That would take time.

Recognition of Jesus is a process for all of us. The pattern of this story can be the walk of our lives as well. Think about it! These two men were walking away from the scene, but were struggling with what it all meant, Their conversation was intense. They were both so caught up in their own grief though, they were unable to help each other remember the hopeful promises of Jesus. Insight would come later. It began when they had to retell their story and their memories to this apparently totally ignorant stranger.

STORY OF PAM TINNIN AND HARDY JOHNSON

A colleague tells the story of when she was very young in 1965, newly married, pregnant, and with all their possessions in a few boxes, traveling on a Greyhound bus from Eugene, Oregon to Kansas City, Missouri on the strength of a job offer from a brother-in-law that neither of them

had ever met. There weren't two seats together so she ended up sitting next to an old man who was unshaven and dirty. His name was Hardy Johnson. She tried to avoid conversation but he was relentless and she actually became engaged in the conversation as he told his life story. Eventually he ran out of talk and fell asleep and in the silent dark, she began to cry, thinking of her own story. Hardy heard her and started a new story about Jesus – about miracles, about compassion, love, forgiveness, and finally about resurrection. He ended with this story of Emmaus. The last thing he said was the most important thing she heard: that Jesus had come for poor folks, folks in trouble, for folks like “me, and for you too, Sugar, you too! He then took a donut out of a napkin and broke it in tow and offered it with tears in his eyes.

Telling our stories does make a difference. When we challenged to articulate our view of what has happened in our lives, we are often surprised by the words that we use, or that we have a hard time finding. Have you ever found yourself, like Pam, telling a part of your life to a complete stranger? I have. The way that someone might ask me a question, like Jesus, asked of these two men, like Hardy asked of Pam, sometimes sparks a whole conversation that I never intended to have. It is one that I often remember and it ignites a whole new fire within me:

“didn't our hearts burn,” one of the men asked?

They were so taken by this very wise listener, that they did not want to part when they came to a fork in the road. They stepped out of their grief and brokenness long enough to offer hospitality. They invited him in, and when he had broken bread and blessed it, they recognized him.

In the course of their journey, Jesus moves from being a precious memory in these men's minds, to a stranger by their side, to one who teaches the words of the prophets, to finally the living Christ fully recognized. In the breaking of the bread, they recognized him. God has done the same with us - not only providing us with the scriptures as a precious memory of divine activity, but also with the living experience of his love. It is a process of recognition. In hindsight, we can often trace the journey that leads us to a new level of faith.

We can hear the scriptures with far more than our rational minds. In fact, it is through our experience of Christ that our eyes are opened to what the scriptures are saying to us. We come to understand the scriptures through Christ, far more than understanding Christ through the scriptures. We have to first have that experience of Christ before our eyes are really open to what the scriptures are saying to us.

Having met Christ, walked with him, talked with him, heard his teaching, and finally recognizing him, these men were able to turn away from their escape and run back to Jerusalem with their good news Jesus had compelled them and enabled them to turn around.

It is interesting that, for years, people have been looking for Emmaus. The scriptures tell us that it was seven miles from Jerusalem, but there are no ruins, no historical artifacts, no weathered maps, though four different villages claim to be the true location.

Perhaps we are looking in the wrong places. Perhaps Emmaus is wherever we meet the holy in our midst; perhaps the road to Emmaus is the road we are all on, taking one step after another, meeting strangers along the way, had hoping against hope that one day we will meet the one we seek. Christ comes in the midst of our daily lives. He does accompany us on our journeys: listening to us, teaching us, and loving us in such away that we can face even the worst in our lives. Come to the table today, asking for that experience in your own life, and perhaps for the life of someone you know who is really struggling, Come to the Christ who truly loves us. If we opened our eyes, if we opened our hearts, if we opened our minds, maybe then we would recognize him as the one with the kindest eyes who breaks bread with us, speaks our name, touches us, and leaves us blessed.

Prayer: (written by Sally Harris)

Unlock our hearts, that we may feel the presence of the Christ.
Unclench our hands, that we may reach out to each other.
Open our mouths, that we may drink in the delight of life.
Unclog our ears, that we may hear your agony in our inhumanity.
Open our eyes, that we may see Christ in all our life together. Amen.

Thank you to Rev. Pam Tinnin for sharing her story in a sermon in 2005.