

Heavenly Heartburn
A Sermon by Dr. William D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
April 25, 2002
4th Sunday of Easter

New Testament Lesson: Luke 24:13-35

NRSV

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ 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?" ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ 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. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² 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?" ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Emmaus - For many contemporary Christians the "Walk to Emmaus" is *one of the most* profound -- if not *the* most profound -- experiences of the reality of the risen Lord in their lives of faith. Modeled after the Catholic spiritual retreat known as *Cresillo*, this "Walk" is a structured weekend experience in which participants are guided through a series of reflective disciplines related to prayer, the reading of Scripture, sharing with other retreat participants, and reflecting upon messages written especially to them by family members, friends, their pastor, and others.

I've not had the privilege of attending one of these retreats, but I have had the opportunity to write letters to a number of participants.

More importantly, I've observed the changed nature of their faith after such weekend encounters; and I'm especially impressed that no one is permitted to participate in an Emmaus Walk without committing to serve as part of the staff for future Walks. This commitment keys on the biblical model from Luke's story. **Cleopas and his unnamed companion don't keep their experience of encountering Christ to themselves. They rush back to Jerusalem to share their conviction that Christ has Risen with the other disciples, and they are each and all encouraged by the experiences they are having.**

Emmaus - Possibly not a real town. It is mentioned nowhere else in Scripture, it appears on no ancient maps, and archaeologists have never positively identified it. Maybe that is exactly what the gospel writer Luke had in mind. Describing a journey that could happen to any disciple anywhere at any time, rather than a physical place where the faithful could erect shrines and assume the place -- rather than the risen Christ -- was the source of the experience of the presence of the Divine.

Emmaus - Author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner interprets Emmaus as:

the place we go in order to escape -- a bar, a movie, where it is we throw up our hands and say, "Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway."... Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had -- ideas about love and freedom and justice -- have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends. (The Magnificent Defeat, pp. 85-86)

Emmaus - Oregon State University religion professor Marcus Borg asks the following about the Emmaus story:

How much of the content of this story could we have captured on a videotape? Would we have been able to record the risen Christ joining them, walking with them, conversing with them, and finally vanishing from the room as they received the bread from him? For me, one has only to ask these questions in order to begin to wonder, "Maybe it's not that kind of story." Rather, the story looks to me to be a metaphorical narrative with rich resonances of meaning. Most centrally, the story makes the claim that the risen Christ journeys with us, whether we know that or not, realize that or not, even as it also affirms that there are moments of recognition in which we do realize that. Thus, I do not see the Emmaus Road story as reporting a particular event on a particular day, visible to anybody who happened to be there, but as a story about how the risen Christ comes to his followers again, and again, and again.

Emmaus - Look at the particulars.

- ▶ Two disciples -- obscure ones at that -- not familiar ones such as Peter, or James, or Nathaniel. Cleopas, named only here and nowhere else in the New Testament. An unnamed companion, possibly assumed in the early church as being the wife of Cleopas. Apparently in the patriarchal culture of that day when two individuals are referenced and only a male is named, the other is automatically assumed to be his wife. Obscure for a reason? Obscure so any member of Luke's church, or so anyone worshipping today at CDA First Presbyterian Church today could put his or her name into the story?
- ▶ Obscure people, walking to an obscure destination, joined by a mysterious stranger. The reader knows the identity of the stranger, but the characters in the story don't. Reminds me of the play "Lend Me a Tenor," in which the whole point of the play is mistaken identity. Observing actors skillfully depicting scenes as though they didn't have a clue as to *who* was really *who*, is a delightful experience.

Maybe – just maybe – Luke counted on his early readers enjoying this story for the very same reasons.

- ❑ They knew the genre.
- ❑ They knew precisely what they were reading or hearing.
- ❑ They knew exactly what Luke was up to -- that he wanted them to realize that no amount of discouragement as disciples could prevent the risen Christ from coming alongside them. That he wanted them to recognize the elements of worship imbedded in this story, namely:
 - ✓ **two (or more) disciples together to hear the *interpretation of Scripture*** -- and yes, note that the Greek word in this story has Jesus *interpreting, explaining*, and not only *reading* the Hebrew scriptures. We might wish we could avoid interpretation, but we can't -- even Jesus and the earliest disciples couldn't;
 - ✓ **two (or more) disciples on a journey**, even though a very disheartened and disheartening journey to begin with -- implying that no amount of discouragement over the lack of power that God seems to have in the course of human events can keep God through Christ from joining with us in our journeys;
 - ✓ **disciples on a journey, but who are also willing to listen to an outsider!** After all, we the readers know; that it was Jesus doing the Scriptural interpretation, but the disciples didn't know it;
 - ✓ **disciples demonstrating their willingness to extend hospitality to a stranger;**
 - ✓ **disciples offering table fellowship** -- the ultimate mark of friendship in Middle Eastern culture. Of course we know -- and Luke's first readers and hearers would have known -- that this was the Eucharist, and that Jesus, the guest, had become Christ the Host.

It was in the breaking and sharing of the bread that Jesus as the Risen Christ was revealed to them.

Luke's conviction, a conviction shared by Matthew and by Paul, was that neither God nor Christ can be known by humans except by revelation.

I like the analogy that *seeing* Christ, is a lot like seeing a shy elusive wild animal.

If you want to see a rare species you characteristically are not going to be successful if you crash through the woods calling out "Here kitty," or whatever variation fits that species.

On the other hand, if you enter their space silently and respectfully, and if you sit at the base of a tree and are willing to wait, you just may catch a glimpse of their presence out of the corner of your eye. You can never guarantee you will, but once you have, and once you know that the creature could have just as easily remained hidden, but chose to let you see it.

I have a deep interest in Native Spirituality and in the so-called Natural Religions. Although I don't believe they have a corner on spirituality, or on ultimate truth, I also know that I have much to learn about their respect for all of creation and for the realm of the world of the spirit.

I'm particularly impressed by descriptions of what is known as "spirit-calling" ceremonies. Those hosting -- and those participating -- in such ceremonies are very aware that you don't just decide to call upon the spirits of their departed ancestors, and expect them to reveal themselves at any old time. No, if you expect the spirits to reveal themselves to you then you'd best purify yourself. Sweat lodges are one means of purification, but there are certainly others.

Following such purification rituals, you'd best insure that all present are there with pure intentions. Individuals can be asked to leave if the elder leading the ceremony discerns that they are there simply to gawk, or to mock, or that they are too impaired due to the use of alcohol or other substances to behave respectfully.

Notice the parallels to a “Spirt-calling” ceremony in this Emmaus story.

The risen Christ has joined these two disciples early on in their journey, and he has willingly shared his knowledge of the Scriptures. However, he doesn’t *reveal himself* to them until they have invited him to spend the evening with them.

Theologian Fred Craddock says the following about the Gospel presentations of encounters with the Risen Christ:

Faith is not coerced ... by revelations to the unprepared... *In the Gospels the risen Christ appears to disciples, not to unbelievers on the street and in synagogues to frighten them into an acquiescing faith. [It was] after instruction in Scripture and the Lord’s Supper, the two disciples recognized Jesus. (Interpretation: Luke, p. 285)*

But notice as well that once Jesus is revealed, he disappears from their presence.

Now what is *that* about?

That is about the reality that -- if we are to be truly honest about it -- God’s presence is almost always elusive, fleeting, dancing at the edge of our awareness and perception.

It is never constant, steady, or predictable.

I think that is one of the reasons so many believers church-hop. They keep wanting to re-experience something that simply can’t be re-experienced with any guaranteed regularity, but they keep hoping that if they find the right preacher, the best choir, the most gifted praise team, the perfect atmosphere of prayer and reverence, the list is endless then they’ll feel closer to God and they can face another week, or month, or year, or maybe even death or divorce or other forms of loss.

The nuns in the musical *The Sound of Music* sing, “How can you catch a moonbeam in your hand, how do you hold a wave upon the sand?” The mystery of transcendence is always transitory. God’s faithful perceive God’s presence in fleeting moments, and then the mundane closes in again.

In other words, **we learn to treasure religious experience in retrospect.**

The two in Emmaus exclaim, “Did not our hearts burn within us?”

We can assume that this means that “their hearts burned within them” while they were hearing Jesus explain the Scriptures, but that it was only later that they *remembered* that experience.

Like Moses, *we usually see only the back side of God as God passes by* (Exod. 33:23).

With Job we confess, “*Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him;/ he moves on, but I do not perceive him*” (Job 9:11).

Therefore one of the secrets of a vigorous spirituality and a confident faith is learning to appreciate the importance of meeting God in the past as well as in the present.

Luke guides us in this spiritual discipline in his initial story of the discovery of resurrection. In that account the angels tell Mary Magdalene, “**Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee...**” The disciples always seemed to need reminding as to what they already knew, and we are foolish if we think we don’t need such reminding as well.

I might add that this concept of reminding folk of what they also know is at the heart of effective counseling. If you seek simply to impart all you – the therapist – have learned in your studies and experience, you may indeed impress your clients with your wisdom, but you will also ultimately overwhelm and frustrate them.

If, however, you can get to know and understand them sufficiently well to “remind them” of what they already know deep inside, then they regain the courage to confront whatever is blocking their

life and growth at this age and stage of their lives.

So, fellow travelers on our separate and our joint roads to Emmaus, let's take courage by what we are being reminded that we already know.

- We need companions on our journey -- of the human -- and, many would add, companions of the animal variety, our dear pets;
- At times, at least, we need to be open to having strangers, outsiders, folks unlike us, join us on our journeys, and we *need to listen to them*;
- We need to be hospitable;
- Then, when we actually have an experience of encountering the risen Christ, we need to recognize that it is rarely -- if ever -- meant to be a private gift. In short, It is almost *never* for us alone. So, we need to go, and we need to tell. Had the earliest disciples not done so, we can be assured that we would not be gathered here today to continue to share the story of the risen Christ.

And as for a congregation of the faithful, we need to remember that our hope is that people will, indeed, have experiences of meeting the Risen Christ through that which we offer, a memory that I'm pleased to say I find imbedded in so many of you, the faithful.

Thanks be to God!