

## Emmaus



Luke 24.34 "When (the stranger) was at table with (the two disciples), he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road' . . . That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together . . . Then they told them (all) what had happened on the road, and how (the Lord) had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

What a contrast today's Resurrection story is with last week's account of the doubting Thomas. Last week, you will remember, that Thomas was skeptical at the first reports of the Resurrection from his friends. Thomas demanded proof before he would believe and when the Resurrected Jesus appeared in bodily form before him the next Sunday, Jesus invited the doubting Thomas to place his fingers in the print of the nails and place his hand in the wound in his side. That was the most physical of the Resurrection appearances, the only one that specifically mentions the scars and wounds of the crucifixion still being present on the body of the Resurrected Jesus.

Today's story of the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus is the most spiritual of the Resurrection appearances. For in today's gospel, two disciples are returning home on that first Easter Sunday afternoon, leaving Jerusalem and going back to their 'ordinary' lives now that the Sabbath and the Passover was over, just as the Apostle Peter with others would soon return to fishing on the Sea of Galilee. One of these two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we are told, is named as Cleopas. The other is unnamed. But apparently, the two had a home together at Emmaus into which they invited the stranger and offered him a meal. Thus one might reasonably conclude that the two were a married couple. In the Fourth Gospel, one of the women at the foot of the cross was identified as "Mary, the wife of Clopas," a

shortened form of the name Cleopas. So the unnamed disciple in today's story was probably Cleopas' wife Mary. Women in the Gospel stories, as we all know, often go unmentioned or unnamed.

Unlike the doubting Thomas, Mary and Cleopas seem confused and saddened about the reports of the Resurrection, not just disbelieving like Thomas. The Resurrection, at this point for them, was nothing more than a rumor, an idle tale told by some women. Nonetheless these two disciples returning to their everyday lives back in Emmaus, were shocked that the stranger who joined them on the road seemed to know nothing of the events of the past few days, events in which they were clearly disappointed and discouraged, for they had hoped, we are told, that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. Even so they were fascinated by the stranger's interpretation of the Scriptures.

When the two disciples reached Emmaus and it appeared that the stranger who had joined them on the road was going on further, they bid him to stay and have supper with them. They wanted to hear more from this stranger and were welcoming of him into their lives. And 'when he was at table with them, he took (the) bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them.' And only *then* were their eyes opened and they recognized him for who he was. And thereupon he vanished out of their sight. Unlike the story of the doubting Thomas, in this account, the ghostly quality of the Resurrection is more manifest and indisputable.

For the two disciples in this story do not recognize Jesus at first, just as Mary Magdalene did not recognize Jesus at the tomb on Easter morning, and thought that he was only the gardener. But unlike her, they walk and talk with him for sometime still without knowing who he was. Only when he broke the bread, did they identify him. The Resurrection clearly means here something more than simply the resuscitation of the physical body of Jesus with its visible scars and wounds. There is no chance in this story for these disciples to place their fingers in the print of the nails or to put their hands in Jesus' side. There is no mention of the wounds here. And in this story, Jesus disappeared as soon as they recognized him. And yet his vanishing doesn't disturb the disciples, who are so excited at his appearing, that they rushed all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the Apostles the news that the Lord was risen indeed, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

While we usually want to identify with Thomas, while we usually want to see the kind of proof for the Resurrection that he saw, we are, in fact, more like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Like them, we have heard reports of the Resurrection; we have heard the rumors and idle tales. Like them we may be confused and unsure of what this all means. Like them we too are sometimes saddened and discouraged, not quite believing and maybe even disappointed, having hoped that Jesus was the one to

redeem us and our ordinary lives. And yet in the same way as them, our hearts are often strangely warmed within us when we hear the Scriptures interpreted and listen to the stories, just as with those two on the road to Emmaus. Like them, we have often invited the stranger into our house, and into our lives. Like them, Jesus often does make his presence known to us, in the breaking of the bread, or elsewhere, and more often than naught, like with them, he then vanishes from sight the moment we recognize him.

In the midst of this worldwide pandemic and the last many weeks of our self-quarantine and physical spacing, I am especially haunted by the words in today's Gospel that Jesus was made known to them in the 'breaking of the bread.' In the breaking of the bread, not in the receiving of the bread, but in its breaking! Many Episcopal churches in this time of separation and isolation have moved to celebrating Morning Prayer on Sunday mornings, since few, if any, can receive the bread at the altar. What point is the Eucharist if there is no Communion, many ask? And yet this Gospel seems to affirm our desire as a parish to continue to celebrate the Eucharist, to take, bless, and break the bread as we once together did week after week. Why? Because we have come to know Jesus in the breaking of the bread, in the actions of the Eucharist, whether we receive Communion or not. We can now easily acknowledge the ancient teaching of Spiritual

Communion, that there are sometimes occasions in our lives when we can't physically receive the bread, but that we still receive spiritually the presence of Christ in our lives. So we here at St. John's continue the tradition of gathering together on Sunday mornings, in one way or another, and together singing praises to God, and blessing, then breaking the bread, and in so doing, finding our Lord's presence among us.

Unlike the doubting Thomas, we are not able to put our fingers in the print of the nails or to place our hands in Jesus' wounds. For us, Jesus' resurrected presence is made real to us in other ways, in unexpected and often unforeseen moments, such as in the breaking of the bread at the Eucharist, or in the loving touch of some friend, or in the eyes of a stranger, or in the wonder of a baby's birth, or a beautiful sunset, or in the joy of a child's game, or the peaceful death of a friend, or simply in the silence of the night. As with those disciples on the road to Emmaus, this is how Jesus will suddenly become known to us in unexpected moments and activities. And though Jesus may at those times immediately vanish from our sight once he is recognized, like with those disciples on the road to Emmaus, we know that he is alive, and that he is present in our lives, because of those encounters. Like them, we can go and boldly share the news with our friends that Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. AMEN