

“Burning Hearts”

Luke 24: 13 – 35

April 30, 2017

3rd Sunday of Easter

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Easter is now all packed up – even those items that were ½ off, on the sale rack in stores last week are now somewhere in containers in a back room. But we church folk go by a different calendar – one that reminds us that Easter is not just one day but a season lasting fifty days! We sing out those familiar – and some not so familiar – Easter hymns and for these first few Sundays, our scriptures are filled with stories of ‘Jesus sightings’.

It was only seven miles, or so the story goes. A short distance for the two walking down the dirt road, they were used to traveling by foot. Only seven miles but on that day it seemed farther for the two because they were carrying such a weight – it felt like the weight of the world on their shoulders, each step burdened down by grief, disbelief, anger, shock, worry, fear. Seven miles to travel. Seven miles of walking with broken dreams, trying to figure out what went wrong, how it could have all happened. He was supposed to be the one! Just a few days previous they were standing with a jubilant crowd waving palm branches and shouting their hosannas! Then those following days, ones they tried to forget but that kept being played over and over again in their minds, days of trial and crucifixion...Hopes and dreams nailed to a cross. And that teasing talk of a few who just this morning said they had seen him again – what was that all about? Talk of resurrection? Dare they begin to let hope in again?

That road that they were on, the road that led to Emmaus, it was the road back to the way that life had been before they jumped on the bandwagon of faithful kingdom talk, a road that will return them to what T.S. Elliot called ‘the human condition; they maintain themselves by the common routine/Learn to avoid excessive expectation.’ (T.S. Eliot, ‘The Cocktail Party, New York; Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950, p. 139) They were lowering their expectations. It was a somber walk.

Who are these travelers? We know that one is named Cleopas. Was this the Cleopas who was the father of a bishop in Jerusalem? Or maybe the Cleopas who was married to one of the Mary’s at the foot of the cross? And if so, was the other companion his wife? We assume a male traveling companion but we just don’t know. They could be anybody. They could be you and me.

And the destination – Emmaus. We're not really sure just where Emmaus was. It doesn't exist today. Most scholars place it somewhere between 7 miles and 18 miles from Jerusalem.

But that's OK, these little-known facts, the mystery that surrounds this story because maybe that was the gospel writer's intent. Because if identity and place are unclear, are fuzzy, then perhaps it's easier to put our own faces and our own low expectation-destinations into this post resurrection story.

Oh we have travelled down our own roads to our own Emauses, haven't we? That place where the fire of hope and possibility and new life for ourselves, for our church, for our world, seems to glow only as a faint ember if that. We walk along with our heads down, just like these two, unable to see the risen Christ walking beside us.

It's a comical story in part. Jesus arrived it says. Did he run to catch up? Was he waiting around a bend in the road? Did he magically appear from behind? We don't know. What we do know was that along the journey 'they were prevented from recognizing him'.

Prevented by whom? By what? Prevented from seeing the risen Christ in their midst by their understanding of how things should take place? By their preconceived notions of God and how God operates in the world? By their expectations? Their fears? Their cynicism? Their intellect? We're not sure, maybe one, maybe all of the above kept them from experiencing the risen Christ in their midst...just as one or all of the above keeps us from 'seeing' as in 'comprehending' as well.

But just then, in the breaking of the bread; that moment of community, of hospitality sharing, of radical welcome sharing, at that moment, they suddenly recognize him! Their eyes were opened, as in their hearts and minds were opened, then he disappeared – just like that. A glimpse was all. A glimpse that reminded them of how their hearts were filled with meaning and purpose and hope, how that ember had been fanned into a burning flame while he talked with them on the road, and they got up right then and returned to Jerusalem.

Changed direction from hopelessness to hope, and I bet one could see it in their steps. No longer heads down but running, laughing, with joy in their hearts knowing that their friend who opened their hearts to God like no other would never really leave them.

You know those times when we find ourselves walking on the road back to the human condition of despair; a world where young high school athletes unexpectedly die, where a student is knifed on a nearby campus, a world where wars continue and hatred grows and it all leads to hopelessness that is, it seems our final Emmaus destination but then and there God happens.

Just when we think that winter's hold will never let go; the first Crocus appear.

Just when we think crucifixion is all there is in our world, we get a hint of resurrection.

When despair seems to be the way of life with no way out, but then a message of hope is heard from scripture, or from a hymn sung, or from the friendship and welcome of community and that heart's ember becomes a bit brighter.

We live the Emmaus story each Sunday as we gather, coming in from the outside world and breaking bread together. We preachers walk the Emaus road every year about this time. Easter Sunday, the pews were full, 175 people, oh how glorious and our hearts were filled with joyful alleluias. But then, it's over. Back to our small church of low expectation with pews less than half full and maybe even feeling of heart burn rather than burning hearts. Just like those disciples, walking with our heads down, heavy hearted, putting away those dreams that started to appear Easter day; dreams of what once was and what could have been. Maybe some of you find yourself traveling that road with church as well...Carrying our own fears and frustrations; not enough money, not enough energy, not enough time.

And usually, or oftentimes, it is at these moments, when we are walking with our heads down back to our common routine, learning again to avoid excessive expectation, that the risen Christ appears. Oh we may not recognize it at first. We may only get a glimpse:

An adult Sunday school class meets regularly in the Hayes Farish room just as they have for decades; and now one of the most diverse group of folks that gather as church, ninety somethings and forty somethings, those who grew up in traditional leave it to Beaver families and those who grew up in broken families, widows and singles, sharing community and there, did you see it, the Risen Christ in the midst of this body of Christ?

A group of adults gather around a table, not in the sanctuary but in the fellowship hall, not to eat but to prepare sandwiches together for the Hope Mobile. Working together, giving of time for another, hearing the commandment to 'feed my sheep' and there, did you see it, the Risen Christ, in body of Christ, gathered in our midst?

Four or five of you gather regularly once a month at Maxwell Presbyterian Church to lend a hand in feeding the community; dishing out hot plates to folks, many who are homeless, and I am sure you have glimpse of the Risen Christ, as your hearts burn with love through service.

An adult spends time with our children during the hour before church, teaching them about scripture, prayer, creation care; an adult spends worship time with children in Children's church and worship and wonder, teaching the essence of faith not just in words but by their care for each child present and oh I can see the Risen Christ there...

It IS the Easter story experienced over and over again; those moments when we experience hope and welcome and love and therefore know that the cross is not the final word.

Something happened on Easter morning that I still carry with me, that gives me a burning heart filled with joy. Some of you may have seen a couple of people join us for Easter Breakfast who didn't really look like they were dressed for church. They day before when we were out picking up the yard, the gentleman passed by. I know him as one of our neighbors who pushes a shopping cart picking up cans, living here and there. A polite man; he collects bottle caps for us, I try to remember to put aside cans for him. Anyway, that Saturday before Easter as he passed by he stopped and we chatted and as he turned to leave I called out, "Hey, tomorrow, Easter Sunday, we have a really wonderful breakfast spread, come join us!" "Really?" "Yes!" "Can I bring a friend?" "Sure!"

Well, I really didn't think much about it until after breakfast had started someone came up to me and said, "Um, there's someone sitting out on the chairs in the hallway, maybe you should come talk to them." I rounded the corner and "Oh, Hi! You came! Come on in!"

We they both went through the line and then picked a table far removed from everyone else. I went over and sat down, kind of feeling it my duty since I had invited them. But then, one of you came up and asked if they would like some hot coffee and then served them. Then a couple more came and sat down with us.

And at one point, it was said, not by me but by one here in the congregation, “That’s the thing about this place. No matter who you are, you don’t sit alone here.”

Sometimes we mess up, we miss the person sitting alone. But that morning, I saw the face of the Risen Christ among us, and that memory has carried me past moments of back to the way life was before; from a heart cold with worry or despair and fear to a burning heart of joy and hope.

Oh how we can put ourselves in this Emmaus story for it is an Easter story, it is our Easter story; our faith story that, as Fredrick Buechner wrote, “Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.”

As we contemplate the meaning of stewardship in this next month, may we remember that our sharing our time and talents and resources is our grateful response to the Easter message. And, as we share our time and talents and financial resources, we may just get a glimpse of the Risen Christ.

Thanks be to God!