

**The Third Sunday of Easter
April 26, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

I want to begin with a confession of sorts. This COVID-19 coronavirus crisis has caused me at times to be fragile ... I find myself chocking up, and tears flowing, around all sorts of events and stories ... and prayers. I'm sure that it shows through at times ... it is the consequences of caring deeply in my heart and soul. But, when it happens please think of it as prayers expressed through my heart and soul.

Secondly, I want share with you about my prayers: I pray for each and every one of you daily. Each morning Caren and I walk up to the church to open it by 9am for individual prayer, and we return most days at 4:30 to lock the church back up. I have the pleasure of seeing all of your pictures at least twice a day. However, you are more than just a picture taped to a pew. I know your stories. I know what matters to you most. And, I pray for all of you to have strength during this crisis, that you stay safe, and that you are all healthy. But, just know ... you are prayed for daily.

The Road to Emmaus. This is a story from Luke's gospel about an encounter with the Risen Jesus on that very first Easter Day. The women who had been part of Jesus' entourage had gone to the tomb at the break of dawn and found it empty. In Matthew's gospel ... and in John's gospel ... there is a description of an encountered the risen Jesus. But in Luke's version of the account, there had been no encounter with the risen Jesus, and these two travelers along the road had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival and Jesus, who had been carrying their hopes, had been put to death on a cross. Their expectations had been shattered ... and their grief was profound. It was on that day that we would come to call Easter that Cleopas and his companion, possibly a woman, were traveling the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were returning to their home. They had waited for the first day of the week to begin their journey so as not to travel on the Sabbath. As they walked along the road they were joined by a stranger who asked them what they might be talking about. This stranger is, of course, the risen Jesus, but the two travelers did not recognize him.

These travelers on the way to Emmaus had had their lives turned upside down by the death of Jesus. So Jesus looked at the two travelers and pondered aloud, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Playing on the words of the men in dazzling clothes by the tomb, Jesus declares that the death of the Messiah should have been no surprise to the disciples.

As the three of them walked along Jesus told them about the Torah and the Prophets, interpreting for them the holy scriptures that were the foundations of their faith. As they approached the disciple's hometown Jesus began to go on ahead, but the two travelers invited him to stay and eat with them. Remember, this was not the same for them as it may be for us today. They did not have a refrigerator from which to pull leftovers, or a freezer and microwave to whip up a quick meal. This invitation meant making bread from scratch, and building a fire in the oven in which to bake it. This was intentional hospitality ... an invitation to a stranger since they still did not recognize him as the risen Jesus.

It was when they were sharing their meal together that Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and then broke it and gave it to them. Do those words sound familiar? I imagine that the words and actions were also familiar to the disciples, and it was then that they saw, not only with their eyes, but with their hearts and souls, that this stranger was in fact the risen Jesus. At that moment, just as the realization hit them, Jesus vanished from their sight. First he was not recognized, then he disappeared.

Oliver Sacks is a neurologist and author of many books about the brain and how it functions. One of his books that you may be familiar with ... if only for its strange title ... is ***The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat***. His book, ***The Mind's Eye***, is about the way we see things in the world around us ... and the ways we don't see things. The fact is that sometimes we just don't see things because they are so out-of-context that it confuses the mind.

So, this morning we hear the story of Jesus and two travelers on the road to Emmaus. Why might these two travelers on the road to Emmaus not recognize the risen Jesus? I don't think we will find our answer in Oliver Sack's book. However, I think that what Oliver Sacks may tell us about the way our brain functions could be a metaphor for how our soul sometime functions as well. So, even as the two travelers on the Road to Emmaus tell this unrecognized stranger the story of Jesus' life and ministry, and talk about the hopes they had had that Jesus might have been the Messiah, why did these two travelers not see that it was actually Jesus himself that they were talking to? Why, when he interpreted all the teachings of Moses and the prophets did they still not recognize him? And what is it about the invitation to share bread together that all at once opened their eyes to see this stranger ... this stranger who just walked on the road with them ... what is it about sharing this bread that open their eyes to see him as the risen Jesus?

The question is not just a question about what happen some 2,000 years ago. Remember, we too are travelers along the road of life. So what keeps us from recognizing the new life of God in Jesus in our lives, even as we share our hopes and dreams, and hear God's word proclaimed to us? And, what in our lives brings us to the place of having the scales fall from our eyes so that we see the resurrection of Jesus as not just an event of 2,000 years ago, but a means to new life here and now?

John Dominic Crossan, author of the bestseller *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* and one of the founders of the Jesus Seminar says of this story, “The road to Emmaus never happened. The road to Emmaus is always happening.” What I hear Crossan saying is that the story of the Road to Emmaus is not a factual one that could have been video recorded if they had had the technology ... it is not that kind of story. However, it is a story of how those disciples of Jesus came to see and know the risen Jesus in the sharing of a holy meal ... and that it continues to this day.

The story itself contains elements of our Christian Eucharist: there is the “proclamation” of the disciples about who the Jesus was; the recitation of scripture and its interpretation as Jesus illuminated the ancient stories; and then the blessing, breaking, and sharing of bread. Crossan believes that the road to Emmaus did not literally happen, but was rather a reflection of the collective experience of the followers of Jesus in the early days following his crucifixion. But he also considers the story to hold a truth greater than time and space, and is just as true for us today as it was for those in the early church.

Like Crossan I believe that “The Road to Emmaus is always happening.” The story of the disciples’ way to Emmaus is our story on the way through our lives. Perhaps Luke tells us this story because most of us are like those two disciples. We have heard the stories of Jesus. We have heard the promises and perhaps even experienced the joy of belief. We have even seen the power of faith in our lives and the lives of those close to us. We, like the disciples, have witnessed, if only at a distance, the life of Jesus.

At times, however, we find ourselves facing shattered dreams and broken promises along the way. We confront the craziness of our world and our lives ... the pain of broken relationships, the disappointment of broken promises, the anguish of facing illness and death, the fear of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, and the sorrow of hopes that are not realized. There are times in our lives when we find that the words of the two disciples on the way are our own words. Standing still, saddened, we utter, like Cleopas and his companion, “We had hoped ...” Like those two journeying on the road to Emmaus, we had hoped that all our questions would be answered, all our problems solved, all our pain removed, and that we would be redeemed from all worry. At times we, like those ancient disciples, wonder if Jesus is simply absent, unavailable ... crucified, dead and buried.

In those moments, the story about the Road to Emmaus offers us a reverent hope. For Christian communities throughout the centuries, the experience of those ancient travelers points to a need to worship, and to the bold claim that in our corporate worship the risen Jesus is encountered. So, Christians have gathered together to worship for 2,000 year. They gathered because Jesus promised that when two or three are gathered there he would be also.

Under normal circumstances we gather to proclaim the Good News. Under normal circumstances, we gather to hear scripture. Under normal circumstances, we gather to hear those scriptures interpreted. Under normal circumstances, we gather to pray. And, under normal circumstances, we gather together at a common table, inviting our fellow travelers to join us in the blessing, breaking and sharing of bread.

But these are not normal circumstances.

Why might the two on the road not have recognized the risen Jesus? Because it was not what they expected, or what they could even imagine. They heard the words, but it was only in living out the same invitation that Jesus had extended to them that they came to literally see the divine power present with them. When Jesus blessed, broke and shared the bread with them they were in “union with” him ... the literal meaning of “communion.”

So, as the first followers of Jesus did along the road to Emmaus, we come together ... only by YouTube video. We gather ... alone, or in pairs ... in our own shelter-in-place home. We listen as we watch the video on our computer, or TV, or maybe our smartphone. And we feast ... me alone at the altar ... and maybe you with some bread or crackers, and some wine or something else ... trusting that even in our distancing we will meet Jesus who will walk with us along the way. We do this because what could not have been predicted, and might not have been expected, was that the end was not the end at all. Those who had originally experience divine power through Jesus’ vision and his example continued to do so after his death. In fact, they came to experience that divine power even more so, because now this power was no longer confined by time and space. The story of the Road to Emmaus tells us a truth that is just as powerful today as it was 2,000 years ago.

Amen.