

Third Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2020

Pastor Zach Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Luke 24:13-35

¹³Now on that same day [when Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene,] two [disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,

¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,

¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad.

¹⁸Then 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?”

¹⁹He 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,

²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

²¹But 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.

²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,

²³and 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.

²⁴Some 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.”

²⁵Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”

²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.

²⁹But 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.

³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

³²They 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?”



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³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"

³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Two men were walking on the road to Emmaus. They were so distracted by what had happened in their part of the world over the last three days that they couldn't even recognize it when Jesus became present in their midst. All they could see is a stranger who seemed to be oblivious to what everyone else was talking about. But this stranger listened to their laments, their confusion, all that they had been carrying on their hearts and minds.

But instead of the stranger joining them in their thoughts, joining them in their speculations, joining them in their confusion, he began to speak to them. The words this stranger spoke were passionate and filled with power, a power that created a burning within their hearts, a power that spoke truth and hope. As they listened to this stranger, suddenly, all of their concerns about what had happened over the past three days seemed to disappear. As they listened, all they cared about was what the stranger was telling them.

Eventually the stranger stopped talking and started to walk on ahead of the two men, but their hearts were still so burning that they pleaded for this stranger to stay with them. There was something about his presence that comforted them. Perhaps, if he stayed with them, their troubles would seem less of a burden. So, they invite him to join them for dinner.

But, again, when they arrive at their home, this stranger surprises them. Instead of being a gracious guest, this stranger turns into the host and invites the two men to break bread with him. It is in this moment when all things connect. The presence of the stranger, his powerful words, the burning in their hearts, and the breaking of the bread all open their eyes to recognize that this stranger is Jesus! It was Jesus' presence, Jesus' powerful word, and Jesus' hosting of the meal that gave these two disciples the freedom to lay down the burdens of the past three days and replace it with hope that the resurrection is true.

After that, their hearts were so filled with joy that they immediately ran all the way back to Jerusalem, at night, when it was dangerous to be on the road, in order to share their encounter with Jesus with the other disciples. They went out to proclaim the good news!

There are several reasons why this is my absolute favorite resurrection story. Firstly, this story has a liturgical flow to it. For those of you who many not know this about me, I am a liturgy geek! I love liturgy, I love studying liturgy, and I love presiding over the liturgy on Sundays. This text includes the four major



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parts of our Sunday liturgy—gathering, word, meal, sending. It begins with Jesus joining the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. When we gather for worship on Sundays, it is with the hope and understanding that Jesus becomes present in our gathering for worship. You could also make the argument that when Jesus asks the two disciples what was on their minds, it is like when we begin worship with confession. In order to help us focus on worship, we often need that moment to confess all of the difficult things we've experienced over the past week. We need Jesus to listen.

But then our worship enters into the word. In the Emmaus story, after the two disciples pour their hearts out to Jesus, he begins to teach them the scriptures and interprets for them how they are relevant to their current time and context. This is also why we hear the word of God spoken to us and why the pastor preaches a sermon. We listen to the scriptures and hear the sermon so that we can come to better understand how God's word has meaning and relevance in our own lives, in our own time, and in our own context. Listening to the scriptures proclamation and the sermon is also to instill a burning in our hearts, for it is often the Holy Spirit who speaks through the word and the sermon to us.

But then the word leads us to the table where Jesus becomes host and shares himself with us. It is in this moment that all things come together so that the two disciples recognize Jesus. The meal is the climax of our worship liturgy. It is the ultimate moment of grace and salvation; the ultimate moment when we see the true hope that we have in Jesus' death and resurrection. When we partake in Holy Communion, we are receiving the real presence of Christ's body and blood. In receiving the body and blood of Christ, Jesus becomes truly a part of us, redeeming us from the inside-out. Eating the bread of life and cup of salvation fills us with the power of Christ's presence so that our sins are forgiven, our faith is strengthened, and our hope becomes assurance.

This meal fills us with such great joy that we cannot wait to go out and share the good news. This, of course, is the sending. The two disciples go out and share the good news with their fellow brothers and sisters. So too does Christ send us out back into the world to live in a way that proclaims Christ's resurrection in all we say and do.

But one of the other things that I love about this Emmaus story is that it also reminds us to pay attention. When we gather for worship, it can be difficult to fully remove ourselves from what is happening in our lives. Even I, the pastor, will find myself at times worrying about things outside of worship that are on my mind. This story reminds us that the purpose of worship is to come into Christ's presence so that we can lay down our burdens (at least temporarily) and be filled with the power of God's word, which is our hope.

Just look what happened to the two disciples on the road. Their minds were consumed with what had happened over the past three days - all the confusion, the despair, and the wonderment. Yet, when



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Jesus began to speak to them, they let go of everything and listened to Jesus. They felt free to only focus on the good news found in Jesus' proclamation.

This is what worship frees us to do as well. The words that we speak, that we hear, that we sing, are all powerful words of God's proclamation. They are there to guide us to the presence of Jesus among us; they are there to fill us with hope; they are there to show us how God is active in our lives; they are there to inspire us to proclaim the good news of resurrection in our broken world.

I often wonder if we sometimes get so used to the words that they have lost meaning to us. Do we pay attention to what we are saying when we pray the Lord's Prayer anymore? Are we so focused on singing the hymn right that we forget to pay attention to the words we are singing? Do the Prayers of Intercession inspire us to act?

It is true that we face challenges in our worship that can hinder us from listening to Jesus. Whether it is concerns on our minds, being on autopilot because we've said the words so many times, or being too concerned about the logistics, we can forget to pay attention and listen. Perhaps that is even more the truth with our virtual worship. This style of worship is strange for all of us, and it may not be what we expected or wanted. For some of us we might be quite frustrated with virtual worship, or at least grieving the loss of worshipping in the sanctuary with other people. Trust me, this virtual worship is not my favorite either, and there are Sundays where I really lament having to lead worship in this way.

But this Emmaus story reminds us that we are free to listen to the good news proclaimed by Jesus; we are free to lay down our worries and our concerns, for Jesus becomes present among us, even virtually, to remind us of the good news of resurrection. Jesus becomes present with us so that we can feel that burning in our hearts, so that we can be nourished at the table, and so that we can be filled with such joy that we feel ready to go out and proclaim good news. The Holy Spirit is ever persistent, and it will find ways to speak to us and free us to listen so that our hope and trust can remain on the resurrection of Jesus.

This is why we walk the Emmaus road every Sunday in worship. We do so because we know that, no matter what has been on our hearts and minds, Jesus will show up, absolve us of our burdens, help us to listen to the good news, feed us at the table, all to get us ready to go out with joy and proclaim the resurrection in all that we say and do.

So, no matter how much longer this virtual worship will have to last, no matter what we may face in the coming days, let us rejoice in knowing that Christ will walk the road with us and continue to create a burning hope in our hearts.

Amen.

