

Hearts on Fire

April 6, 2008 | Third Sunday of Easter

Year A

Lectionary citations

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

1 Peter 1:17-23

Luke 24:13-35

April always starts with April Fool's Day. I never was one to come up with clever or convincing April Fool's jokes. However, my daughter, as she was growing up, would always come up with a story that would completely take me in. I remember most of them involved finding money. Of course, I would believe anything my daughter told me, which made it easy. After I was let in on the joke, I felt foolish, but also deeply loved. There is something about the Emmaus walk that reminds me of a loving, gentle, and sweet joke.

One of the definitions of a joke is "a brief oral narrative with a climactic humorous twist." Now, I realize that the Emmaus story does not necessarily have to be seen as humorous. Yet, I can imagine Jesus smiling as he chose to meet these two disciples on the road and asked them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" Although the scripture simply says, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him," I might speculate that Jesus did not allow them to recognize them. Jesus in his resurrected body differed in some hard to explain way from Jesus in his original body—there was something different about him that made him difficult to recognize. However, in this case, I believe that Jesus did not want the excitement of seeing the risen Christ interfering with his main purpose--teaching the disciples to interpret the Old Testament scriptures in the light of the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, the Christ of God. Therefore, they walked along, and Jesus

“interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

When they reach the village, Jesus lets the disciples talk him into staying for the evening meal. When he blessed and broke the bread—strangely taking the role of host—the disciples recognized Jesus and he “vanished from their sight.” Certainly a “climatic twist” as far as the disciples were concerned, although they not necessarily a “humorous twist.”

Yet, from a certain angle, there is something about that story that might make you smile. The form of humor is very subtle, a gentle, ironic humor. One definition of irony is “incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result.” Again, I may be forcing the issue, but isn’t there something ironic about the Easter story? Jesus arrives in triumph like a king on Palm Sunday. Unexpectedly, only a few days later he is arrested, tried, and executed as a criminal. However, against all expectations, he won’t stay dead! Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. Again, against all expectations, this stupendous event is not shared with the world, but only to a few, as Peter says, “to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”

The resurrection proved beyond all doubt that Jesus was the Messiah of God. Although the disciples and many of the Jews believed in the resurrection of the body, they believed in a general resurrection on the Day of the Lord. No one had ever imagined that an individual human being could be resurrected prior to the end of times. This extraordinary event marked Jesus as not just God’s anointed one, but the Son of God. Yet the risen Messiah did not immediately overturn the Roman conquerors and restore the kingdom to Israel. The risen Christ, in all his power, does not perform any miracles, (with

the possible exception of the miraculous catch of fish in the second ending of John.) All the miracles, healing, walking on water, calming storms, casting out of demons are performed by Jesus when he is in a body like ours, not in his transformed, resurrected body.

Instead, for forty days, he appeared to his disciples, eating, drinking, and teaching about the kingdom of God. Before he ascended into heaven in his resurrected body, he charged the disciples to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus has shown that he is God and that he has conquered death. Nevertheless, instead of exercising his power to overturn the kingdoms of the earth and immediately establish the Kingdom of God, he eats and drinks with the disciples, teaches them about the Bible and the Kingdom of God, and gives them the assignment of spreading the Gospel, the same assignment that we are carrying out today. The entire Easter narrative is a succession of events that alternately defeat the expectations of the disciples and then exceed them beyond their wildest imaginings. If that is not gently ironic, I don’t know what is!

If Jesus came back to teach his disciples, then we might be interested in what it was he wanted to teach them! The Emmaus story is the principle post-resurrection narrative in the Gospel of Luke. It seems to be a simple story, but underneath the surface is amazing richness and depth. Through this story, Jesus teaches the disciples how he has returned from dead to create the Church, the body of Christ, which will be his witness to the world. The story teaches us what the Church is and what it needs to do. I can see at least six major lessons in the Emmaus story.

The first lesson we might notice is that Jesus appears, not to the leading disciples,

the 11, but to two otherwise unknown disciples, perhaps part of the larger group often called “the seventy-two.” They are Cleopas, nowhere else mentioned in the Bible, and an unnamed disciple. Some have suggested that this unnamed disciple was a woman.

Although these are not leaders of the church, they are members of the Body of Christ. As we may remember, Jesus said, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” This story might remind us that Christ is present where ANY two or more Christians are gathered together in his name...a pastor or other “expert” is not required.

Second, it is important to Jesus that disciples understand what happened to the Messiah. Moreover, the way that they need to understand this is through understanding the books of Moses--the first 5 books of the Old Testament--and the books of Prophets--the rest of the Old Testament. We understand who Jesus is by studying the Bible. Jesus wants the Church to study and understand the scriptures, not just memorize creeds and statements of faith! Teaching about the Bible is a key task of the church. All disciples need to do their best to understand what the Bible says about Jesus.

Third, the disciples demonstrate one of the key values of the Church--hospitality. The disciples follow the custom of the day in letting a stranger on the road join their party. However, they go beyond that towards an “extravagant welcome” by inviting this stranger to break bread with them. The church is about welcoming strangers into our fellowship and sharing our blessings with them. Remember the parable of the King, where Jesus said, “I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

Fourth, the key event in which we recognize Jesus for who he truly is, our Lord and our God, is at the Lord’s Supper. Jesus repeated the key act of the Last Supper for

these disciples, “he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them.” Jesus was showing us how to be with him, how to recognize him. The sacrament of communion is just that, the way to be with Christ.

Fifth, when disciples recognize Christ, they realize that not only had Jesus opened their minds to understanding the scriptures, but that their hearts were on fire for the Lord. 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?" Although we are called to use our intellect to understand the scripture according to our gifts, this understanding will open our hearts to the Holy Spirit that they might be set on fire for the Lord.

Sixth, after recognizing Jesus and realizing that Jesus has kindled the fire of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, the two disciples return to Jerusalem to rejoin the community: “They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.” We can imagine them running away from Jerusalem in fear and trembling, seeking the safety of this quiet village. However, when they recognize the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread, they return in joy to Jerusalem, to tell the 11 what they have seen. Jesus was gently reminding these disciples that they belonged with their brothers and sisters, doing the work of witnessing the risen Christ. Sometimes we may need to flee to the quiet of Emmaus, but Jesus will always call us back to his community, the church.

The biggest irony of Easter is that although Christ has defeated death and sin, we cannot simply rest on his laurels and wait for our reward in heaven. The resurrection of Jesus promises a future resurrection of all the saints in new imperishable bodies. This resurrection will be accompanied by the transformation of all creation into something more perfect and beautiful than anything we could ever imagine. Jesus makes it clear that

he does not intend us to spend this life waiting to die and go to heaven. As witnesses to the resurrection, we are called to learn as much as we can about the Kingdom of God from the scriptures through the Holy Spirit. Then we are to spend this life as witnesses to the resurrection and the Kingdom. Again, being witnesses means preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. It means studying the scripture, sharing our abundance with strangers, opening our hearts to the Holy Spirit, and joining with our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. As Peter said in our Epistle reading, “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.”

Although it is beyond our powers to bring the Kingdom of God to completion—that will be at a date set by the Father when he transforms creation into a new heaven and a new earth—we have been charged to live in the light of our coming resurrection. We have been promised eternal life in a new imperishable body, in a world of unimaginable wonder and joy. The dreams of those who waited for a Messiah to rule like an earthly king were disappointed. So too will be the dreams of those who want to leave this life for an eternity of rest as a disembodied spirit in heaven. This is the greatest irony of all—thanks to Jesus, death does not lead to nothingness or an eternity as a spirit. Instead, it leads to our real life, the life for which this one is only a short period of preparation. Although this fallen body and world will be transformed, this life is where Christ has charged us to live “as if” we are in the Kingdom of God. After we have shown what good work we can do for Christ in this life, we will be given a much better life where we can

do so much more. Sometimes our work as witnesses is difficult, although for most of us, it is not nearly as difficult as those whom Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.”

Doing this difficult yet joyful work, in the company of our brothers in sisters, “clothed with power from on high” is no price at all to pay for God’s gift of eternal life in our resurrected bodies. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” Amen.

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