

Past Sermons

The Third Sunday of Easter
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Salt Lake City
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It has been the custom of the Church down the ages to look particularly to the resurrection stories for guidance in our relationship with the Risen Lord. Today's gospel in particular has been a source of inspiration. So what do we find there? In this case a great deal. We find:

- That the Risen Lord comes to us wherever we are. We do not have to be with the faithful, chosen group for Jesus to come to us.
- That fear and worry can keep us from recognizing him.
- That we are often 'standing still and looking sad' when Jesus chooses to come to us.
- That he will come to us with questions, drawing us out, encouraging us to examine our situation and circumstance.
- That we, the people of God, those closest to Jesus, those to whom he comes directly and upon whom he counts to carry on his work, are often 'foolish and slow of heart.'
- That we need Jesus' help to understand the Gospel, to understand his role in our lives and in the world.
- The importance of hospitality, of welcoming the stranger in the process of opening ourselves to the unforeseen presence of the Lord.
- That he often comes to us when it is 'evening and the day is almost over,' when we have nearly, or utterly, given up hope.
- That he accepts our invitations.
- Of course, most notably in this story, that Jesus offers himself to us, to be known and recognized, in the breaking of the bread.
- That sometimes we do not notice our own reaction, how our hearts burn at his presence until after the fact.

- That when we have an experience of the Risen Lord, it is most appropriate to share it with others, others who may be similarly in need of hope and experience.
- That when we do share our experiences, others will often have experiences to share with us.

What a lot of information from a single story! I have put these insights into four clusters for further consideration. First: 'Foolish and slow of heart', 'sad and standing still', 'when it is evening and the day is almost over,' 'wherever we are.' We all recognize our circumstances at one time or another in these descriptions. 'Foolish and slow of heart' is a fairly accurate description of most of us most of the time. Lucky for us, as Paul reminds us, God chooses the foolish. It is generally our self-absorption which puts us in these circumstances.

When we are sad, because of disappointed expectations, because of some kind of personal loss, perhaps out of sheer weariness, we most often stand still. Our sadness deprives us of the ability to move forward, to keep on with the journey of our lives. So we stand still, not the stillness of expectation, not an alert stillness, but a sad, sour, limp sort of stillness, wholly lacking in energy. We are overwhelmed by hopelessness, by the sense that our day is waning without reaching the point we had hoped for. We have all experienced this dark time.

This is not the drama of despair, but a kind of vacant lack of hope or any positive impetus. Our foolishness is evident in the slowness of our hearts. Our hearts are no longer moved by hope and compassion. Unmoved, they fail to move us forward and so we are left listless. This is a consummately 'un-Easter' frame of mind, a frame of mind for which we may feel at least vaguely guilty. Standing still, feeling that the joy has gone from the world, and that we may just slowly fade into the darkness is most unappealing.

When we find ourselves in such a moment in our lives, we have no energy to help ourselves and we have nothing which attracts others to our aid. But these are moments in which Jesus often comes. The Risen Lord is always walking along the discouraging road to Emmaus looking out for stuck souls.

At those moments when we feel most unlovable, Jesus surprises us with the touch of his love. Indeed, wherever we are, however far we have strayed from the community of the faithful and the path of faith, the Risen Christ can and will come to us, be with us until we recognize him.

Next: Fear and worry can keep us from recognizing the Risen Lord; Jesus brings questions; he helps us to understand; our reactions to Jesus' presence with us may be only apparent in retrospect. It is often said that fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith. We have all had the experience of fear which inhibits all that we know we should do. Fear prevents us from feeling love and from acting out of love. Fear pulls us into ourselves

and drives us to self-protective, blind, and ungenerous actions. Fear prevents trust and closes us in upon ourselves. When we submit to fear, we do not see the people around us who love us — and we do not recognize even the Risen Lord right with us. This is no surprise, since it is consistent with everything we know about fear.

What is surprising is that the Love which is God is not put off by it. Our pride tends to be injured when we are not recognized and embraced by those who should know us. Jesus has no such limitation. So the unrecognized Lord comes to us in an unexpected unrecognized guise, often causing us to question. The unrecognized, but energizing presence encourages us to examine our situation, to explore what is going on in our lives, perhaps why we are afraid, or discouraged, or enervated. And, having encouraged us to understand what is happening in our lives, this presence, in whatever unexpected form the Lord comes to us, then helps us to understand where the Good News is for us in this particular time and place. Always foolish and a bit blind, we need help, and the help is offered, help to better understand who Jesus is and was and will be, how God is working in our lives and in the world.

Third: the importance of hospitality, the divine acceptance of our invitations, and the breaking of the bread. Invitations are very important in the life of faith. God's offer to us of a place at the table, at the victory feast of the Lamb, is the ultimate gesture of hospitality. We, the unworthy, have been invited to feast with God, have been invited into the eternity of the divine Kingdom.

So also the importance of our showing hospitality to anyone in need is integral to the Scriptural portrayal of human responsibility. Had Cleopas and his companion not invited Jesus to stay and eat with them, they might never have recognized him. Their hospitality, the opening of their hearts even a small amount, opened them to this experience. When we invite other people into our lives, we open a path for God, always eager to come to us.

And when we truly share the sustenance of our lives, when we let people into the intimate heart of our lives by sharing meals with them, we allow our hearts to be moved and our eyes to be opened.

The words used of this meal are the words of the Last Supper, the words of the Eucharist: the bread is blessed, broken, and given. It is the context of gratitude to God which makes all meals holy and all sharing of them a sharing of our relationship with the divine.

This particular story is key in our understanding that the Risen Christ comes to us each time we celebrate the Eucharist, and is there to be recognized by us 'in the breaking of the bread.' It may be only a momentary recognition, as it was for that pair of frightened disciples, but it is enough.

Finally, the sharing. Peter said to the crowd, after accusing them of murdering the Messiah, 'The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone.' If the Good News is for those who most overtly rejected God's offer of love by murdering the Christ, then clearly it is indeed 'for everyone.'

Likewise each experience of the Risen Christ, of the love of God in our hearts and minds and lives, is for everyone also — as when Dame Julian describes her revelations as given not just for her, but for all her ‘even Christians’, for all who seek to know God and his Christ.

This does not mean that I am unfaithful if I do not share each detail of my prayer life with everyone I meet. But it does mean that authentic encounters with God in Christ naturally move us to share our growing faith with others.

Such encounters quicken our hearts and open them to those around us, move us forward on our paths toward God. And forward can mean, as for Cleopas and his companion, turning back. If we were running away, heading for a fearful seclusion, away from the community of faith, our impetus forward will turn us right around and send us back to the people we fled.

And when we share what we have seen, it is most likely that others will have things to share with us — and in this the Lord is again active, building up our faith, building up the Body of Christ, to be his presence in the world.

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.