

Pastor's Message – 4/23/23
Luke 24:13-35 Psalm 116:12

Two weeks ago, Easter Sunday, we read from the gospel of John. The four gospel writers each emphasize different parts of Jesus' resurrection; only John talks about Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus in the garden. Although the particulars of Jesus' Resurrection according to each gospel writer are different, there can be no doubt that after Jesus had been put to death, after meeting him, his disciples and other followers eventually came to be convinced that he had risen from the dead.

The gospel passage we hear today, presented in two different ways, may be a very familiar passage to you or maybe you have never heard it before or perhaps only bits and pieces. We have to remember that, for the two disciples we read about, it is the evening of the resurrection. For us, we are already two weeks removed from Easter Sunday. For them, the events of Holy Week, i.e., Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, have just happened.

Two unnamed disciples of Jesus, utterly stunned and disillusioned by the crucifixion of Jesus and not convinced by stories from some of the women of their number that they had seen a vision of an angel telling of his resurrection, were heading toward a village called Emmaus. As they walked along, they were talking about all the rumors that were spreading like wildfire that day, of how the women, having gone to the tomb of Jesus to anoint the body, found first that the stone in front of the entrance was rolled away, and second, that the body of Jesus was missing. And a little while later, two angels had suddenly appeared beside them and told them that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Of course, the women were anxious to share their amazing story with the other disciples, but when they told them, the disciples didn't believe them, except for Peter and John, who had gotten up and run to the grave and discovered for themselves that the tomb was empty.

So, on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his buddy were so wrapped up in sharing this amazing piece of news that they didn't even notice that a stranger had joined them in their walk. "What is so interesting," said this stranger to them, "that you would rather talk than walk?" Whereupon they surely stopped in their tracks, and said to this stranger, "What planet have YOU been on? Haven't you heard the news out of Jerusalem over the last few days?"

"No, I haven't. What's going on?" the stranger asked.

And so Cleopas and his companion proceeded to tell the stranger all about Jesus, who had been a man that many people had pinned their hope of God finally sending them a prophet powerful enough to set Israel free, but that the chief priests and other leaders had captured him and handed him over to be sentenced to death and to be crucified, which had happened three days earlier. They explained that some women had that very morning gone to Jesus' tomb and come back with this

incredible news about the tomb being empty. The women reported about angels appearing and telling them that Jesus wasn't dead, but alive!

"And," Cleopas said, wide-eyed: "Some of us have gone to the tomb ourselves, and the grave has definitely been opened, and the body is, in fact, missing."

This is the evening when, although Jesus' disciples had locked themselves in a room, Jesus still appeared to them – in Jerusalem. This is the same evening when the disciples, except for Thomas, were together in that room. This is the same evening when two other disciples, one named Cleopas and an unnamed other, are walking away from the disaster of Good Friday and the puzzlement of Easter. Luke doesn't tell us why Emmaus is their destination. Are they fleeing to a hiding place? Do they have relatives there? Is it simply a place to hole up and think about what just happened? Most of the other disciples had decided to hunker down and stay put in Jerusalem, but these two keep walking, and the risen Jesus, who is still appearing to His disciples post-resurrection, joins them on the road.

"Yes," said the stranger, whom they do not recognize as Jesus, "but isn't that just exactly what was SUPPOSED to happen to the one whom God was to send, if Israel was to really be set free?" So Cleopas asked the stranger to explain this interesting remark, and the stranger began to make a very compelling case, citing key passages from the Old Testament, starting with Genesis, and including Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, and finally wrapping it all up with points drawn from each and every one of the prophets.

When they have reached their destination, and Jesus indicates that He is going on, the two disciples invite this stranger to stay with them and, as the story continues, which we did not read today, "after getting home and washing up for dinner, they sat down to a meal together. And then the stranger reached out and picked up the loaf of bread from the table, said a blessing, broke the bread, and gave a portion to each of them, and then, *poof* suddenly, he was gone. Just disappeared into thin air.

And it was in that exact moment that his identity was made known to them. They realized that they had been going down the road with Jesus.

Isn't that the way it always is? Going down the road, we never know when we will meet Jesus.

The message of our Bible reading today is a comforting one: Looking for Jesus? Frustrated because He seems absent, not in your life? There is nothing wrong with you. Jesus is with you, even if you can't see Him, and He'll be the one to make Himself known. How does Jesus make Himself known in our lives? His interactions with the men on the Road to Emmaus provide some clues.

It's clear He does not do it directly or through ordinary means. You won't see Jesus like we see and talk to each other. It would not do any good. Even if He did appear that way, like the men He met on the road we will not recognize Him until He takes the initiative through the word of God and the Holy Spirit to open our eyes.

The good news is that these men on the road did not find Jesus! Society says that that's what it takes to be a Christian. In fact, our Bible reading makes it clear that the risen Christ finds us! Then He is the one who lets us know who He is (vv. 30-31, 35).

Remember back to what Cleophas said, "Some of us have gone to the tomb ourselves, and the grave has definitely been opened, and the body is, in fact, missing." They were still grieving and perplexed and confused and disillusioned. It was Martin Luther who said, "We do not believe in the resurrection because of the empty tomb but because of the Christ-filled world." Jesus lives. And where does he live? In heaven, yes. But he also lives in our hearts! We know that Jesus lives, that he rose from the dead, because we have met him. No, not in visions that we have seen or voices that we have heard. But we have met him through his Word, the Scriptures; in his Church, through his people; in the sacraments; in prayer; and in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus comes to seek us out and reveals Himself to us in many and varied ways and situations. I remember a commercial that used to run on television during the Milwaukee Brewer broadcasts from what was once Columbia/St. Mary's Hospital in Milwaukee. The commercial pointed out there are angels in our midst, messengers from God, who shine forth the healing grace of God in our midst. The commercial had various people, including doctors, nurses, and others, who were framed by light. "Some don't agree," the commercial says, "but the evidence is indisputable."

This appearance of Jesus could only have taken place on the road. It is as we are living our lives that there are opportunities to encounter Jesus again. There are always new journeys and the story of the road to Emmaus suggests that Jesus comes up alongside us as we travel, revealing who He is, and who God, is in the encounter.

I don't always agree with John Dominic Crossan, one of the more liberal theologians of our time, but I hear wisdom in his words as he says, "Emmaus never happened; Emmaus always happens." Emmaus can happen for each of us, when, even though we are burdened, Jesus comes up alongside of us. Consider during this week, where has Emmaus happened for you? Where do you see Jesus? Where do you experience Amazing Grace?

Our bulletin cover today is taken from Psalm 116 and, in that psalm, the writer cries, "O LORD, I pray, save my life!" (v. 4). The writer is beyond being able to save himself. So, God does exactly that. God saves his life! Psalm 116 is a song of thanksgiving for recovery from serious distress, probably a grave illness. We don't know the exact nature of the psalmist's distress from which he has been delivered, except that it was severe (v. 3). Now what?

Classed as a song of thanksgiving, Psalm 116 both celebrates God's answer to the psalmist's prayers for help (vv. 1-2) and declares the psalmist's intention to now go to the temple and "return to the Lord" those things the psalmist had promised while praying the prayers (vv. 12-14). Those who are in the midst of grief and

suffering might be tempted to say, "What abundance?" Those who, like Job, have been tested almost beyond endurance might be tempted to withhold their praise and thanksgiving until this God delivers. No matter what the answer to prayer; no matter what fortune or misfortune may ride in on the dawn, the call comes for us to "offer a thanksgiving sacrifice" to God for the great abundance given.

If we're thankful for a blessing God has bestowed on us, is it enough to simply utter an exclamation much as we might say "Awesome!"? Some people will thank a donor by writing a thank you note. If handwritten, so much the better. You might even think about what you could do for your donor by doing something more tangible, like babysitting, taking care of the dog, or offering some fish from what you caught that day on the lake. In any case, the writer of Psalm 116 certainly thought about how he might offer a praise payment for all that God has done for him. He even uses the word "sacrifice." What would God happily receive from us as a praise payment?

In the midst of life's trials, disappointments, and failures. When things seem to be the bleakest, that is when Jesus meets us on the road to talk with us and reveal God's Amazing Grace all throughout history, even our personal histories, but we don't always recognize Jesus' presence in the here and now.

To concentrate solely on the past, or for that matter, the future, the last supper, or the heavenly banquet is to miss Jesus here and now. When we hear Jesus' words and sense his presence in the miracles of everyday life it is that present experience of the risen Christ in our midst, not only during the Easter season, but always, that gives meaning and purpose and power when people experience Jesus. It is a presence and power that gives to Christians gathered in the church the energy to witness and work in this world where we live and journey.

When we are focused on ourselves and our lives and feelings, we may miss Jesus in our midst, but in the hearing of God's word and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is here again. The blanks in our lives are filled and Jesus comes into the empty places in our hearts. It is on each of our roads to Emmaus that Jesus comes to walk with us and talk with us and, in the words of that favorite hymn, "and tell me that I am his own."

Wherever life's journey finds us, God has already delivered. The gift of life, the miracle of breath and being, the jaw-dropping awe of realizing that there is one who created us and knows everything about us, and still through it all, loves us. This, finally, is what brings us to our knees and opens our mouth in praise. It is in those moments, we realize in just how many ways we are blest that God has been with us all along, has fulfilled his promises scattered throughout the Bible and can be trusted to be with us into the future.