

SERMON: April 30, 2017 – Luke 24: 13-35**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

Our gospel reading today, about encountering the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, is a pure gift to weary preachers. Having come through the emotionally grueling and service-heavy time of Holy Week and Easter, these personal, uplifting stories of encounters with the risen Christ are the pulpit equivalent of fishing a well-stocked lake: you barely get your line in the water, and you've already got a catch.

The standard preaching line on this reading from Luke 24 moves from this story of Jesus being recognized in the breaking of bread, to an easy, meaningful sermon on the power of the sacrament of communion. The story and sermon go like so:

Two followers of Jesus, Cleopas and another man, are on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, engaged in anxious chatter about the crucifixion of Jesus, and reports of his resurrection.

They are joined in their walk by the risen Christ, but are kept from recognizing him. Jesus abruptly redirects their conversation, preaching a mini-sermon on the integral connection between the teachings of the prophets and the sufferings of the Christ.

Undaunted by the fact that this roadway preacher has just chided their lack of faith and perceptiveness, the men invite him, as night is falling, to stay with them rather than going on. Their travelling companion blesses and breaks bread with them and at that moment, they recognize him as the Christ, and at the moment of recognition two things happen: Jesus vanishes, and the men realize how their travelling companion's words had been burning in their hearts.

Unable to just leave it at that, these two men hustle back to Jerusalem, find the eleven remaining disciples, and in the final verse of our passage (v.35), deliver the punchline: "they told the disciples what had happened on the road, and how the Lord was made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

There's quite a bit of early Christian doctrine articulated in the middle of this scripture – and in our other reading this morning from 1st Peter – but none of that theology gains any relevance for the travelers until they gather at the Lord's Table, and bread is broken and shared, the first communion meal shared AFTER Christ's death and resurrection.

If this lesson comes up on a communion Sunday three years from now when it hits the lectionary again, I will happily preach that communion sermon – but this time around something else has been tugging at my sleeve. What has struck me this week, is that this well-known story is filled with details and assumptions. I'm not a naturally inquisitive person but the specifics of this story kept standing up, wanting to be noticed, so it was time to ask some questions. Whether these questions lead to consequential answers, I will leave to your judgment.

The first detail/assumption is right at the beginning: the "two followers of Jesus" walking and talking. In my mind's eye and in every single picture or painting I have seen, it's been two men. But the Greek simply says, "two of them" – two of the heartbroken followers who had been impacted by Jesus' death on the cross. I have heard it suggested that the specific Greek word chosen for "two of them" is a word often used to describe a married couple. So, two men were on the road... or a man and a woman were on the road, ostensibly Cleopas and his wife, perhaps arguing about what had happened to Jesus and why the first-hand accounts of the women had not been accepted by the male disciples. Strikes me as a dandy topic for a husband and wife to bicker about!

Setting aside the subtle assumption that this was two men on the road starts to open up new possibilities. It certainly puts a different shape on the invitation for the travelling companion to

stay with them and share in their table hospitality, if this is a couple inviting a traveler into their home. It also reminds us of the significant proportion of women among the earliest Church, which, within 200 years was already being hidden, and invites everyone in the room, not just the males, to see themselves as full partners in journeying with Jesus.

The second detail, is the fact that Luke chose to name one of the travelers, a man named Cleopas. Cleopas was not one of the inner circle of twelve disciples, but he is considered a Saint in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Cleopas was one of the earliest witnesses to the resurrection, perhaps the first male witness. And then there's this: in John 19:25 we're told that three women named Mary were at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified: Mary Magdalene; Mary, mother of Jesus; and her sister, "Mary the wife of Clopas." Early Christian traditions hold that Clopas was the brother of Jesus' father, Joseph, and the Bible translation site, Bible Gateway, suggests that the names Clopas or Cleophas (in John) and Cleopas (in Luke) are the same name, virtually interchangeable.

At the risk of drifting into conjecture, let's plug THAT detail into the story: the couple that did not recognize Jesus could have been his Aunt and Uncle, among the MOST likely people on this earth to recognize him. As that thought percolates through me, it reminds me that sometimes the people who know Jesus best, may be the most likely to get sidetracked by theology or doctrine or Church squabbles, and miss where Jesus is present and active and calling. If someone THAT close to Jesus – his own Aunt and Uncle - could not recognize him as they walked and talked together, I sense a note of grace for me, for that endless list of times that I miss out on Jesus moments: when I am distracted by other things, when I am uncomfortable with what he is calling me to do, or when I am caught up in my own neediness.

The third assumption I would like to push, is the notion that this has to be a story about communion. As mentioned at the start of the sermon, the communion connection is a significant part of this scripture's preaching potential, but just for the moment, let us read this story as though the breaking of bread is simply the breaking of bread. For if you recall, throughout his ministry, there were many scenes of Jesus at table, and he carefully chose those who would join him at table: namely, the despised, the excluded, the unclean. His opponents, looking to discredit him, would often start their attack by pointing a finger at the terrible people that Jesus dined with. Inviting people to break bread with him was a very personal and very political thing to Jesus.

If we open up this detail, to include ANY sharing of table fellowship, not just our ritual act in Church, the story continues to open. The identity of Jesus was hidden to his fellow travelers, until they invited him to their table, and bread was shared together. In their act of hospitality to a stranger, they made themselves vulnerable to God's agenda, and in the sharing of a meal, Christ was revealed. Opening their hearts and their homes to one in need, welcomed Christ.

And with that, I would like to follow up on those words from our Call to Worship today. I invited you to think of a time in your life's experience when Christ was hidden in plain sight: when Christ was present in the actions of a stranger toward you, or your actions toward a stranger, but you did not realize it until later. I'd like you to turn to the person beside you, and take three minutes to share that experience with them. I will do the timekeeping: when you hear the chime, you're at the half-way point and it's time to make sure the second person gets to share their story; when you hear a double-chime, it means it's time to wind things up...

... Our surprise encounters with Christ often take that form: initiated by our offering hospitality to a stranger, reaching beyond our comfort to engage the need of the world, and in so doing come to realize the truth of what Jesus said in Matthew 25:40 "whatever you do unto the least of these, you do unto me". When we are in the presence of the stranger, the outsider, even the one we fear, we are often in the presence of Christ, whether we realize it or not.

And **our final detail, is Emmaus**, a reasonably-well-known place name from the Bible, 100% because of this scripture passage. Now, I had assumed that since it is specifically named, Emmaus was a place that everyone would know, but even if we go back to the early centuries of the Church, it seems that nobody knew for certain where Emmaus was – there are at least four main candidates and none of them check all the boxes. The name itself might give a bit of a hint: Emmaus comes from a Semitic term meaning “warm well” – which makes me picture this entire scene as a couple walking up to the Cave and Basin, but I digress – and we know that the distance from Jerusalem to Emmaus is seven miles. Yet even with this knowledge, modern archaeology and ancient witnesses still can’t confirm the precise location of this village.

For those of you wondering what difference this could possibly make, consider this: if we are specifically told that these travelers are heading to a place that nobody knows, maybe this is a story about a trip to anywhere and everywhere. Dr. Bruce Epperly puts it this way:

“We really don’t know where Emmaus is located. Several possibilities have been surfaced, but perhaps vagueness is a virtue. In not localizing Emmaus, we can open to the possibility that Emmaus is everywhere. Wherever we are on the road and at every mealtime, Jesus comes to us, filled with energy and possibility, and the joy of resurrection. We can have new life, and we can be born again, right now at any venue. Let’s keep moving, and chart new adventures, because Jesus walks beside us on the road.”

I agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Epperly. When I accept that Emmaus could be anyplace, and that for me opens this story up once again: any day and every day, can be a day when Jesus surprises me on the road.

And that’s where I want to leave off on this journey:

- Any day and every day, can be a day when Jesus surprises me on the road.
- Every sharing of hospitality, every breaking of bread with strangers, is a time when the presence of the risen Christ is revealed.
- And every one of us – male or female or anywhere on the gender spectrum, devout from a lifetime of journeying or just starting out – is invited to be on the holy road of faith and welcome.

In our life together as a congregation, and our individual journeys, may our eyes be open wide to all of life’s opportunities to be with Christ and in Christ. Amen.

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