

SERMON for Easter 3 – April 23rd, 2023

Readings: Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; Psalm 116: 1-4, 11-18; 1 Peter 1: 13-25; Luke 24: 13-35.

I don't know about you, but I was brought up never to talk to strangers ... the old "stranger danger" syndrome. And yet when you think about it, how often have you sat on a bus, a train, or an airplane, and struck up conversation with the stranger sitting next to you. Sometimes you might have a real deep and meaningful and end up opening yourself up, telling a complete stranger some of the things you have never told anyone else before. There can be a great freedom which comes from sharing our true self with others, even if we can only manage to do it with people we will never see again (or hope we will never see again!). Could it be possible though, that if we shared our deepest hurts and faith struggles more with people (and truly listened to theirs), Christ's presence would become more real to us like it was for Cleopas and his companion? ¹

Today we have the story of Cleopas and his companion returning home to Emmaus from Jerusalem. This is a glorious story, with so many layers and shades, that I will be focusing on the gospel alone, but please, do read the other readings too.

This is a master stroke of storytelling, as Luke weaves it all together — unknown travellers; the resurrected Jesus, who is present but in an unrecognized, mysterious fashion; the travellers' sudden recognition of Jesus; and just as sudden, his disappearance.

This story seems to be a particular favourite with many people. They seem to identify with the two travellers who are blind to the presence and person of Jesus until he sets their hearts burning and opens their eyes with the breaking of the bread.

It is a story full of emotion and mystery. How would we walk the road to Emmaus? There is no doubt that the story directs us to the church, where we may encounter Jesus in the word and the sacraments. But not to "the church" that's equated with the institution and Sunday worship. We are directed instead to the church that meets a very ordinary world, a world marked by human loss and human hospitality.

We never hear of Cleopas again after this passage, and we never learn the name of his companion. Tom Wright in his commentary *Luke for Everyone* suggests it was his wife, and names her Mary, but in reality, we will never know! They are not important people – and that is the crux of it. They are "ordinary" people who have had the grand adventure of following Jesus and his disciples, but now that is over, and they are walking back home.

With Jesus' death they have lost their faith and their hope. They are not looking for him; in fact, they don't even recognize him when he joins them. Yet he chooses this place of loss to meet them. When he asks about their sorrow, they are so absorbed in that grief that they cannot believe that this person doesn't know about their experience. They tell Jesus the story of his own ministry and death and add the dubious news of his resurrection.

For them the story is over. Their hopes have proven empty, and they are defeated. But then Jesus tells the story back to them, this time through the lens of their own faith tradition and scriptures. "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe ..." The story is not about them and their disappointment, Jesus says. It is about life, the universe and everything in it.

They respond to Jesus with hospitality, engaging him in conversation and expressing concern for him when he appears to be travelling beyond their stopping point. "The day is over," they insist. "It's getting dark. Come eat with us and rest and be safe." Then, in language that deliberately echoes the Last Supper, Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives them the bread, they recognize him, then almost immediately lose him again as he vanishes. But the experience on the road and at table has transformed them, and they immediately return to Jerusalem to find the disciples and the rest of their group.

What makes the story remarkable is how unremarkable it is. I can understand Jesus appearing to the remaining 11 disciples, to the faithful women who followed him, and even to Paul—all very practical appearances in terms of establishing the church and its mission. But Cleopas and his companion are nobodies who have no idea what God might be doing. They could be any one of us. Their road to Emmaus is an ordinary road, the road each of us travels every day. This is what sets this story apart from other accounts of Jesus' Easter appearances.

Yes, the story resonates with a sense of the church and its mission and of the tremendous power of the word and the sacraments to connect us with the presence of God. But its image is of God and a church that walk alongside human confusion, human pain and a human loss of faith and hope.

Emmaus invites us to expect God to find us.

Emmaus challenges us to see that it isn't our unshakable faith and deep spirituality that connect us with the risen Christ, but our smallest gestures of hospitality and friendship. ²

This is what I love about this passage - its transformative power – the ordinary into the extraordinary. The mundane into the profound and sacred.

A walk home. A conversation with a stranger. The offer of hospitality. The sharing of food.

The walk home becomes a shared journey.

The conversation becomes the most sacred unpacking of history, the most profound 'Bible study' of all time.

The offer of hospitality ... how often have we invited God in unawares? How often have we allowed the guest to become host at our table?

The sharing of food – the breaking of bread, unshackles the mind, eyes and heart of Cleopas and his companion, and they see and understand just who this stranger is, and are instantly transformed by joy.

Jesus brings a whole new meaning to "stranger danger".

As we continually meet Jesus in the friends and strangers who cross our path as we journey through life, are we prepared

- to be transformed,
- to open our hearts and minds so they may burn inside us,
- to allow the stranger, the invited guest, to become the host at our table?

As we live in these often difficult times, are we prepared to walk a different journey, be hospitable to the stranger in our midst, open our hearts and minds to listen to new truths and deeper understanding, all as we gather together to break bread.

May God's presence in our lives always bring a burning heart, deeper faith and the joy to share with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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