

Easter 3A 2017, April 30, 2017, Luke 24:13-35, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA,
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The Walk to Emmaus has always been one of my favorite stories from the Bible. The first time I heard it, I mean really heard it, I felt just like these two disciples must have felt when their eyes and hearts were opened to recognize Jesus eating a meal with them. I would also venture a guess that most of the Lutheran pastors I know also love this story for the way it weaves together both the human drama of grief and joy, as well as the divine drama of God's work revealed in scripture and sacrament. It's all here. There's nothing left out. Like Jesus did when he started with Moses and all the prophets, let's spend some time together this morning interpreting this passage and see what it has to tell us about the Messiah.

It all happens on the road. The road to Emmaus, a town seven miles away from Jerusalem. Imagine the road from Lancaster to Lititz. That's about how far they were going to travel. They were walking; about a three hour trip. We don't know why they were going to Emmaus and we don't really know who they are. Luke, our gospel writer, identifies one of them as a man named Cleopas. Here's an intriguing possibility. The gospel writer John identifies one of the women who stood at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified as "Mary, the wife of Clopas." Is her husband Clopas and this Cleopas the same person? The names are similar enough, like Simon and Simeon denoting the same person. So here's a possibility. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus are Mary and Cleopas, husband and wife. They are among the many others besides the twelve apostles, who followed Jesus. Now they are leaving Jerusalem. Clearly dejected; feeling sad. They even tell us so in very poignant words. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." They had hope in Jesus. They saw in him the potential to be the Messiah of Israel. The one who would lead a bring in a new kingdom of peace, maybe even overthrowing the repressive Roman regime. Now, their hopes dashed to pieces, all they can do is pack up and leave.

All along the way Luke invites us into the story and here's our first point of entry. Throughout our own lives we experience hope that is left unfulfilled or even destroyed. "We had hoped" to find a good job or meaningful career, but now I feel stuck in this dead-end job going nowhere. We had hoped to retire and enjoy our remaining years travelling, seeing the world, but illness keeps us home. We had hoped to see our son grow up, go to college and become an engineer, but he got involved with drugs in high school and now we don't even see each other anymore. I've heard variations on these stories and many others like them. Deep, profound loss shatters our hopes, destroying a vision for the future, leaving us helpless. There are times when we walk with those disciples on the road to Emmaus. The journey starts in hope, symbolized by Jerusalem. But then hope is destroyed and all they can do is leave.

Jesus starts walking with Mary and Cleopas. They don't recognize him yet. This itself is significant. For even when we feel most hopeless, when the world has crashed down around us, Jesus still walks with us. He doesn't abandon us. We may not always recognize him and it may be our sadness, our grief, and our feeling hopeless makes us feel profoundly alone, but he continues to walk along that road. Mary and Cleopas start up a conversation and tell this stranger who isn't really a stranger what had happened. The events of the past several days, including the wild and unbelievable tale of angels announcing Jesus' resurrection. But as yet no one had seen him.

Jesus then leads Mary and Cleopas through a Bible lesson. Remember, Jesus is using just the part we today call the Old Testament. He starts with Moses and he then goes through the

whole Bible weaving the stories together and showing how they all point to God's Messiah, who would not come as a mighty warrior king, but rather as one who suffers and dies and enters into glory. But that's not how anyone read the Bible. They believed God's Messiah would redeem Israel from suffering. The Messiah would lead the charge and throw off the jack-booted oppressors who brought great suffering to the people. What no one could see, no one anticipate, is that God would save Israel through suffering, through the suffering of Israel's representative, the Messiah. Israel herself and in particular the Messiah, would experience all the suffering and paid of human violence and even death itself. Yet without the actual story of Jesus no one reads the Bible this way. That's why Jesus tells the story to Mary and Cleopas. He opens up for them a way to hear God's mighty acts of redemption as God taking on all the powers of violence, rebellion and death in order to finally and ultimately overcome them.

The Bible then is not some dusty book we piously leave on a shelf or table. Rather the Bible tells a living story of God's saving and redeeming love for the world. But to read it and understand it in the way God wants us to, we need the risen Lord with us. We need his guidance and his inspiration so that we might understand and have our hearts burn within us. This is why the reading of scripture and spending time with it is so central to Christian worship. The Bible takes a central role in our time together. Because it's here, during this time when we listen to scripture together, that the risen Jesus is with us. He opens our hearts and our minds to hear these stories in light of his resurrection. He teaches us just as he taught Mary and Cleopas how to hear the scriptures in such a way that we might know him.

But the story doesn't end there. It might have. Jesus seems to want to go on his way when they arrive at Emmaus. But it's getting late and they urge him to stay and have some supper. And then, Luke tells us, Jesus does with them what he most likely did many times other times with his disciples. He sat at table with them, took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. The words describing his action should sound familiar. Luke wants them to sound familiar. This is Holy Communion. Jesus taking bread, blessing it, breaking it and giving it to eat, and in doing so recognizing the risen Jesus brings everything together. On the road their hearts burned as they heard the scripture, but it's only here, as they gather for what seems like an ordinary meal now turned extraordinary by the presence of Jesus do they see him for what he really is, the crucified and resurrected Messiah. Luke wants us to see in this story the beginning of what becomes the central act of Christian worship and how we come to encounter the risen Jesus. The Bible and the meal together, scripture and sacrament woven tightly together. Take scripture away and the meal becomes a piece of magic. Take the sacrament away and the scripture becomes an intellectual or emotional exercise, detached from real life. They must remain together, Word and Sacrament, for together they form the center of Christian living.

The Walk to Emmaus is one of my favorites stories. The depths and heights of human drama are here. Dashed hopes and burning hearts. Profound grief and great joy. Everything we experience as human beings is here. Which means everything we experience is within the realm of God's care and grace. Nothing exists outside his love for us. On that walk to Emmaus we encounter the depth and sweeping breadth of God's movement in human history. In these stories he hear and see how God is now moving the world away from all the violence and death we can inflict upon it, and how through the suffering of his own Messiah, we are freed from our captivity to death's power. God is bringing in a new world no longer bound but being made free. The way we hear this truth is by listening to the one who continues to be with us, dining with us at his table, hosting us in the breaking of bread. Welcome to the new creation of Jesus' risen life, a world made new. Amen.