

Sunday April 23rd, 2023

Easter III

Luke 24:13-35

“Met on the Road”

The older catholic priest, heading to a funeral service, was driving alone in a rural part of the southern US. It had been some time since he had seen any example of civilization, and so when he saw a little one pump gas station, he turned in and drove up to the lone standing pump. Bubba was on duty that day, and noticed as the priest got out of his car that he was in his black vestments, and had a broken arm, so Bubba hurried over to lend a hand.

As Bubba filled the car, he made mention of the priest clothing and said, “Why do you wear those clothes?” “I’m a Catholic priest” came the reply.” Bubba then asked, “What happened to your arm?” “Oh that! I slipped on the bathroom floor and hit it against the commode.” Bubba finished up, and made his way into the little shop, to get the priest’s change, and it so happened that Bubba’s brother Lou had watched the whole thing transpire.

Lou said to Bubba. “Why’s that guy dressed funny?” Bubba replied, “Oh, he’s a Catholic priest”. “And what happened to his arm?” Lou asked. “He slipped in the bathroom and broke it on the commode.” After a pause Lou said, “Gee, Bubba, what’s a commode?” Bubba replied, “How should I know, I’m a Baptist.” I wonder if any of you have ever found yourself lost or confused in a religious discussion, or bible study or maybe, many a Sunday during the sermon.

Have you ever wondered if there are any secrets in the Christian faith you do not know about? Stuff only the insiders know. Like maybe after you are baptised, they tell you other things. Maybe the secret handshake. I should tell you that there are book writers out there who claim there are hidden secrets, and who claim to be able to reveal the secrets. Sometimes they write about hidden biblical prophecies, or vast conspiracies perpetrated by the church. Such speculations can fire up the imaginations of lots of gullible people.

It’s the only way to explain the popularity of books like Dan Brown’s *The da Vinci Code*, which reputable historians call pure fiction, and literary critics call not even good fiction. But people want to believe in conspiracies. There is even a whole movement out there called the “Truther movement” that questions everything. Everything from 911 conspiracies, to questions about former President Obama’s birth records.

People get so engrossed in possible conspiracies that they can’t see the truth when it is right in front of their eyes. And no amount of convincing, or presentation of the facts, is going to dissuade them from what they believe is the “real” truth. We even have a new phrase circulating of late about this called “alternative facts”. Such “alternative facts” is the case of our two friends who are making the seven-mile journey to Emmaus from Jerusalem. Here we catch a glimpse of what it actually takes to convince people of the truth.

The two men, one of which Luke says is named Cleopas, but who are not among the 11 disciples or what we might call the inner circle. Instead, they were in the next layer of followers of Jesus, which included the women who had gone to the tomb and saw the angel.

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We know absolutely nothing about these two men and we never hear of Cleopas again, but it is likely safe to assume they are heading home to Emmaus. Heading home after the events of what just transpired in Jerusalem. The experience these men have on the road, and the subsequent meal, were very important to Luke, as no one else records this incident.

And the lessons laid out here can speak deeply into our own faith journey, because as we know, being a person of faith means walking the road. Jesus said he was “the Way, the Truth and the Life”, and the early church were known as “People of the Way”. Being a person of faith means moving from where you are, to somewhere else, both literally and spiritually.

The two disciples are making their way along the road, involved in what appears to be a rather animated conversation. Jesus draws up near them, and asks what they are talking about. We are told that the men are kept from recognizing that it was Jesus, and we’ll get to that fact a bit later. Luke tells us they stood there looking sad. This is important. These two men are grieving. The death of Jesus represented a crushing loss to them.

They had placed a great deal of faith in Jesus. They had hoped Jesus was the Messiah, and now he was gone, and with his death their hopes were gone. There was nothing left to do but head home. Their animated conversation was nothing more than a kind of post-mortem on their experience. But the men respond to Jesus’ question with a bit of confusion. “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days.”

“What things?” Jesus asks. In other words, what do you men know about what happened? What meaning do you take away from this experience? So, they tell it like a news report. They even, for good measure, throw in the story of the women, and others, who went to the tomb of Jesus and found it empty. But and here is the crucial point in their report, they did not yet believe Jesus rose from the dead.

The two men are evidence that belief in the resurrection was not self-evident to the earliest followers of Jesus. The natural, logical conclusion, when the tomb was discovered empty, was not to conclude Jesus was risen. This despite Jesus had predicted it would happen, and the religious leaders and Pilot sealed the tomb to try and prevent anyone from stealing the body and claiming he had risen.

Most of the followers were left at first, with confusion and even more grief. Time and time again we see that people only believed when the risen Jesus appeared to them, as we see with Peter in verse 34. Back on the road to Emmaus, Jesus listens to them and then chastises them for their lack of faith. He then carefully lays out the need for this all to happen as it was foretold in the prophets. And still the two men do not recognize Jesus, nor has their perception of events in Jerusalem been altered very much.

As they drew near the village of Emmaus, Jesus made like he was going to continue on, but they urged him strongly to stay the night. This was a natural expression of middle-eastern hospitality. But also, it is clear they were drawn to Jesus, and wanted to commune with him longer. No self-respecting person would forgo offering food and lodging to a traveling companion. Traveling at night was never a good idea. So, after some coaxing, Jesus agrees to stay.

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And as a good host is apt to do, food is offered to Jesus.

In what is clearly a reflection of the last supper experience, Jesus blesses the bread, and breaks it. We are told that immediately their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. Then he was simply gone. Now it all made sense. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” We read that the two men, who had just walked seven miles, left immediately to return to Jerusalem and rejoin the others.

The experience of the two men is confirmed by Peter’s experience, and in verse 36 Jesus appears to them all. There is great comfort in this story, and maybe that is partly why Luke preserved it. The resurrected Jesus was not just for the inner circle of disciples, but for all people. Jesus intentionally sought these men out, as I believe he seeks us out as well. Luke’s point is that what we all need; every one of us, is an encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

It is what we all hunger for. Whether we can articulate that hunger or not, that hunger is in all of us. And that brings us to the elephant in the room in this passage. I know its likely been bothering you as we journeyed through this passage. Why, do you think, did the two men not recognize Jesus, until he broke the bread? Is there a point to this lack of recognition?

Others who saw Jesus, post resurrection, recognized him, although Mary needed her name spoken to put the pieces together. The reason why the two men did not grasp who Jesus was at first, maybe at the very heart of why Luke kept this story, but more importantly why the early church preserved this story. The experience of these two men is a reminder that most people come to faith in the resurrected Lord how? Through worship.

Look carefully, and the elements of worship are preserved in this story. First, we have scripture read or retold. Jesus told the two men scriptures that spoke to the events in Jerusalem. Then we have proclamation or preaching, where the scriptures are explained or interpreted, which is what Jesus did. Finally, in the sacraments or ordinances like the breaking of the bread. The risen Christ is therefore found in worship.

Worship is also where Christ continues to reveal himself, and where our faith in him is strengthened and sustained. Luke’s point here is that faith in Christ is born and nurtured where people gather, as the disciples did, to share in worship. And the revelation of Christ is experienced in all manner of shared experiences in the faith community. Through the word, water, bread and wine, hugs and handshakes, acts of kindness and generosity.

The very incarnation of Christ reveals itself as the community gathers and worships. And I suspect it happens not at our instigation, but at Christ’s initiative. As the Holy Spirit moves among us, we encounter the risen Christ in each other and together.

The Apostle Paul declared that we are the Body of Christ. We incarnate his presence. The Word becomes flesh in us. “Where two or three are gathered together, there I am in the midst.” Gathering and worshipping, reveals his presence as being on our own cannot. Why this is so, is clear enough to understand. Christ knew we needed each other. We need the: strength, faith, skills, vision, and resources of each other to do Christ’s work.

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As the book of Hebrews states, “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Heb. 10:24-25) It would seem then that the full experience of the risen Christ cannot be achieved away from the body of Christ. There are rich, life-giving offers of grace, that only appear, and are only available when the community gathers for worship.

All of us need to be provoked to love and good deeds. There is a momentum that occurs when God’s people gather to address the needs of the wider community. I can safely argue that “We Believe in Simcoe Day”, First Serving, refugee support, and a whole host of other life affirming efforts may have been one person’s initial vision, but ultimately it took the gathered community of Christ to see it to fruition. People were provoked to good works.

I firmly believe that one of the reasons the church seems to be so anemic in reaching our world is that we come to worship as strangers and leave as strangers. Somehow, we’ve lost the vision of what our times together mean.

Tony Campolo shares a story about an incident that happened several years ago in St. Louis Missouri. Apparently, someone had stolen the doll that represented Jesus from the manger scene outside of city hall. The next morning, a television newscaster announced in a somber voice, “Someone has stolen Jesus. Last night someone went to the manger scene at city hall and stole the baby Jesus.

This morning, Jesus is missing. If any of you out there have any information about where Jesus might be found, please contact this station immediately. We are most anxious to recover Jesus and put him back where he belongs.” (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p. 22) This is what the world is asking of us. They see contemporary Christianity with all its factions and discord, and its inability to make any difference in people’s lives, and they wonder what we have done with Jesus.

Where is the biblical Jesus? Why do our hearts no longer burn, because he is speaking to us? Why, are we not like the men in the story, who after encountering the risen Jesus, rush at night back to the community of faith? Why are we not excited and anxious to be among God’s people, the body of Christ? These two men knew they needed their fellow believers, to share their story and to understand it more fully.

My purpose today is not to make anyone feel guilty because they miss a few weeks at worship, but rather to accentuate and prioritize the truth that we need each other.

God intended us to walk this road together, to encounter the Risen Christ together in worship. God intended us to provoke each other to good works. And frankly, it is difficult, if not near impossible, for any of this happen if we are not together. We are the body of Christ, and we are connected to each other, whether we like it or not. And as with our friends on the road to Emmaus, together we encounter the risen Christ when we gather to worship. When the word is read, and interpreted, and when the bread is broken and shared, the risen Christ is met.

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BENEDICTION: Love one another from the heart. Though you have been born anew, do not love as young children do, but love as love fulfilled. Tend that tiny seed that was planted among you; raise up a tree whose roots tap the water of life. And the world shall know by its fruits the glory of the Lord.