

Sunday, April 26, 2020
Third Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Luke 24.13-35

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/315818769388158/>

(Sermon begins at about 15:00)

“The Promise of the Road to Emmaus”

We just heard the last of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances for this Easter season. Not the last appearance he would make as reported in the Gospels, but the last one we get in our Sunday lectionary for this year. And this is a fitting way to wrap up the appearances of the Risen Christ, as today’s Gospel provides a bridge between the Risen Christ appearing to his disciples and his appearing to us.

The story of Christ’s appearance on the road to Emmaus occurs, as we are told, “on that same day,” on the day of Easter. Cleopas and his unnamed companion have left Jerusalem after a harrowing and confusing week. A week before, they were following along as Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Four days later, they were having a Passover meal with their friend and teacher. The next thing they know, he is being arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. After his crucifixion, his body is placed in a tomb. And then, a couple days later, some women in their group find the tomb empty, the body missing. Things turned upside down so quickly. We don’t know why Cleopas and his companion are heading to Emmaus, but they probably just wanted to get out of town. Away from the insanity and the uncertainty they had just lived through. Wanting to put the whole thing behind them. Best to go away and get a fresh start.

As they were traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, they meet a lone traveler on the road—unaware that it is none other than Jesus. Although the reality of the events they had lived through, what they are living through—the inexplicable events of Jesus’ death and the empty tomb—keeps them from seeing that this traveler is actually Jesus. They are obviously and visibly distraught and forlorn. The stranger, Jesus, asks them what’s going on. They proceed to fill him in on what had been happening in Jerusalem this past week. As if he didn’t already know. And how, they “had hoped that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel” (Jn 24.21). It is obvious from their talk and their demeanor that their hopes had been dashed against the walls of the tomb. That they were feeling let down. That they were overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness.

They continue with their account of recent events, of how angels told the women in their group that Jesus was alive, and how some of the disciples went to the tomb but did not see him. There is a definite sense that Cleopas and his companion were unbelieving of what had happened. Despite Jesus’ telling the disciples that he would die and be raised again, despite the proof of the empty tomb, they did not quite believe any of it. How could they? Nothing like this had ever happened before. They had no frame of reference. So, naturally, they took things at face value. Jesus dead. Body gone. End of story.

But Jesus seems to know just what they need. They need a reality check. They need someone to put things in perspective, to help them see the truth of what really happened. “Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Jn 24.25-27). In the midst of their grief and unbelieving, they needed to be reminded of what they know deep in their hearts. And that seemed to help. They still do not recognize Jesus, but then again, any teacher of the time would have been able to provide a scriptural analysis about the messianic prophecies.

By this time, the trio has reached Emmaus. Cleopas and his companion must be feeling a little better, perhaps feeling some glimmer of hope. Because as Jesus makes as if to continue on his way, they are quick to urge him to stay with them. He has obviously provided some sense of light and hope that they needed at this dark and hopeless time.

Now for the *pièce de résistance*. As they were preparing for the evening meal, this lone traveler “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight” (Jn 24.30-31). Energized with a new sense of hope, with the realization that their hopes had not died with Jesus, that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead as he foretold, Cleopas and his companion make the return trip to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what had happened. “How he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Jn 24.35). And they find out that they were not the only ones who had had experiences of the Risen Lord.

The story of the road to Emmaus is more than a journey from point A to point B—of the physical journey of two disciples from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It is also a spiritual journey, a journey of faith, a journey of revelation. It is their journey from lack of recognition and understanding of who Jesus is, to full recognition of him in their presence, and with that recognition, a journey to the ability to witness to the hope and the promise, to the reality, of the Risen Christ.

The journey along the road to Emmaus is not just that of Cleopas and his companion. It is the journey that we all make throughout our lives. Perhaps multiple times in our lives. It is a recognition that there are times when we feel alone. When we feel that Christ is not present. Times of illness, disaster, financial difficulties, broken relationships, death and loss, even global crisis. At such times, it is easy to question. To feel that our hopes have evaporated, gone missing. Just like Jesus’ body went missing from the tomb.

We may be particularly susceptible to such feelings of uncertainty when we do not have visible, tangible signs of Christ’s presence. Like when we do not have access to our church. For like Cleopas and his companion, it is easy to see Christ being made known to us in the breaking of the bread. In the act of receiving Christ’s body in our hands. In the act of taking that body into ourselves, to nourish and sustain us. That is real. That is tangible. That is a sign of the hope and the promise of the Risen Christ in our midst.

But what about when we don’t have that? What about those times, like now, when we make our journey into an unknown future, without benefit of any tangible sign of Christ with us? Seeking to leave behind the painful memories, the painful experience that is our immediate

past, of a time before. Longing to leave behind our current reality. Our only thought to get to someplace different, someplace safe, someplace we can begin anew. Be that a physical place like Emmaus or a mental, emotional, or spiritual place. A journey that is often lonely and filled with uncertainty.

The story of the road to Emmaus, the experience of Cleopas and his companion, shows us that despite what we may be feeling, despite the sense of darkness, the sense of hopelessness, the sense of loneliness, we are not alone. The Risen Christ walks with us on our difficult journeys. Even when we are not aware of it. He is there, as he was with those two distraught disciples, gently reminding them of who he is. Gently reminding us of the truth of who he is. Gently reminding us that he is with us even in the midst of darkness.

Now, of course, on such journeys, we do not encounter the physical person of the Risen Christ. That does not happen anymore since his ascension. But my personal experience is—and if you think about such times in your life, I am certain you will agree—that there were companions who traveled with us during our own experiences of hopelessness, darkness, and loss. Someone or someones who seemed to show up just when we most needed them. Someone to gently remind us of the truth. Someone to give us a sense of hope. Someone to remind us of the promise that we do not make this journey alone. In those moments, the Risen Christ is indeed present. It is Christ working through those who accompany us on such journeys. I don't know about your experience, but like Cleopas and his companion, I don't always recognize Christ walking with me in the moment. But somewhere down the road, I will realize just what happened. When I can look back and say, "was not my heart burning within me as we traveled that road together?"

The experience on the road to Emmaus was a turning point not just for those who walked that road out of Jerusalem. It was also a turning point in the lives of all the disciples. The story continues after Cleopas and his companion return to Jerusalem to tell the others what had happened. In what follows, the Risen Christ again appears to them all, shares a meal with them, and reiterates what he had told them before his death. How he is indeed the Messiah foretold by the prophets. He then tells them, "You are witnesses to these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Jn 24.48-49). He lets them know that there is still more. That God will send the Holy Spirit to energize and guide them in continuing the work that he began. That God will use the difficult experiences they have just been through as a foundation for what they need to do next. Assuring them that they are not and will not be alone.

That is the promise the Risen Christ makes to all his disciples. That is the promise he makes to us. That we are not alone. No matter what road we may find ourselves on. No matter what road we are currently walking. He is with us, gently reminding us of the truth. Seeking to give us hope. Assuring us of the promise of the empty tomb. Assuring us of the promise of the road to Emmaus. Not just assuring, but fulfilling, the promise of the road to Emmaus, where our eyes are opened to his presence with us. The presence that makes our hearts burn within us once more.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!