

Sunday, April 23, 2023
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/788953442663159>

(Sermon begins at about 20:20)

“Our Road to Emmaus”

Luke’s account of Jesus’ first post-resurrection appearance on Easter Day is completely different from the accounts from John’s Gospel we have been tracking thus far in Eastertide. It also differs significantly from the post-resurrection experiences recorded in the gospels according to Matthew and Mark. In all the Gospels except Luke, Jesus makes his initial appearance to Mary Magdalene, either by herself or with other women. And only then does he appear to the other disciples. And all these appearances occur at or near the tomb. But here, in Luke’s account, Jesus does not make his initial appearance to Mary Magdalene or Peter or any of the other eleven disciples. And he does not make his appearance at the tomb. Instead, Luke records Jesus as making his first post-resurrection appearance to two previously unknown followers of Jesus as they travel from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus.

About the only similarity between Luke’s account and those reported in other Gospels is that those to whom Jesus appears do not recognize him. Although, even in this there is a pretty major difference. In the other Gospels, while there is also a lack of recognition of who Jesus is, Jesus confirms his identity right off the bat. But not here. In Luke’s account, Jesus spends quite a bit of time with Cleopas and his companion—hours in fact—as they walk the better part of the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, without ever directly revealing who he is. So why the significant difference in accounts?

Admittedly, that is a question that we cannot know the answer to. After all, none of the initial eyewitnesses to any of the initial post-resurrection appearances (with the possible exception of John) ever actually recorded what happened. At least the Synoptic Gospels, and possibly John, were all second or third hand accounts at best. And the earliest Gospel was written at least 35 years or more after the fact, with the latest being written 60 or more years after the fact. Again, recorded by those who were not even there, but only heard the stories.

So, does the fact that the post-resurrection accounts do not quite agree—or in the case of Luke’s account, disagree significantly from the other Gospels—call into question or diminish the veracity of the post-resurrection appearances? I think not. Because, while the specific details may vary—sometimes slightly and sometimes significantly—what the authors chose to report was done with specific intent. Each author was writing to different audiences for different purposes. So, each author would have chosen to emphasize one detail over another, potentially downplaying yet other details, or even massaged the story to better suit their agenda. This does not mean the events themselves were not true. This was completely consistent with ancient understandings of what is considered true. What can be hard for those of us living post-Enlightenment, in the post-modern age, to wrap our heads around is the ancient understanding

that just because something was not factually accurate does not mean that it was not true. For the ancients, what was important was conveying central truths. Which sometimes meant a greater truth being conveyed that transcends the objective facts.

That appears to be what is going on here, when we compare the Lukan version with all the other Gospel accounts of post-resurrection encounters. Each of the Gospels was written to a particular audience. As such, each Gospel has a particular focus and chooses to present information about Jesus' life and ministry, and even his resurrection, in a way that each of the respective audiences would understand. In a way that conveyed the specific message that audience needed to hear. In all cases, the bottom-line message is the same: telling the story of Jesus and his ministry, with the goal of demonstrating that he was and is the Messiah, the Son of God. Without getting bogged down on details about the audiences and messages of each of four Gospels, suffice it to say that Matthew, Mark, and John were written to primarily Jewish audiences. Luke, on the other hand, stands apart in that he was writing to a decidedly Gentile, or non-Jewish, audience. A testament to the fact that the good news of Jesus Christ is not limited to religious insiders in a particular place, but is open to ordinary people wherever they may be, regardless of previous religious beliefs or affiliation.

While all the Gospels and their accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances have important messages for all believers, I would argue that the account in Luke's Gospel has something unique to say to us. After all, Luke was writing to Gentiles. And we all—or at least the vast majority—are, by definition, Gentiles. That being the case, what might the Lukan account of the initial post-resurrection encounter—decidedly different from all others—have to say to Luke's Gentile audience? Be it the original audience nearly 2,000 years ago, or be it his contemporary audience, in this time and this place.

There are several interesting aspects of the encounter on the road to Emmaus that might shed some light on what we are meant to understand about Christ's resurrection. These fall into three specific aspects: to who, how, and where, he appeared.

First, to whom the Risen Christ makes himself known. Now, we know from all the Gospels that Jesus had many, many followers. But the ones we hear most about throughout the Gospels, the Twelve, as well as other regulars such as Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother Mary, were among the inner circle of Jesus' followers. So, while Jesus could have appeared to any of his followers, it is only logical that, as in all the other Gospels, he would make his initial appearances to the likes of these, to the big names, to the leaders of the movement. But in Luke's account, Jesus does not appear to the "major" disciples: to the remaining eleven, or to Mary Magdalene, or any of the other "usual suspects." Instead, here in Luke's account, Jesus chooses to appear to two unknowns. Cleopas and his companion, who are not mentioned anywhere else in any of the other Gospels. As we heard, Jesus does eventually get around to visiting his chief lieutenant, Simon Peter. But the initial appearance? To Cleopas and his companion. Which sends a strong message that the good news of the resurrection is for anyone and everyone, regardless of status. Even everyday folk like Cleopas and his unnamed companion.

Which raises another interesting aspect of the story of the road to Emmaus. Of the two to whom Jesus initially reveals himself, one is named and the other is not. Why is that? Why give the name of one and not the other? Perhaps because we are meant to be left with some ambiguity about who it is who encounters the Risen Lord. Perhaps each of us are meant to fill the role, to take the place of, Cleopas' companion, the unnamed, unknown disciple.

Another interesting aspect is how the Risen Lord makes himself known. In all post-resurrection appearances, those visited do not initially recognize Jesus. In all the other Gospels, Jesus immediately confirms his identity to those he is appearing to. But not here. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus takes his own sweet time. He spends the time instead reminding them of how what happened is revealed through Scripture: "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." But even this was not enough to open their eyes. It was only after they stop to share a meal. As we are told, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." It was in that simple act, a reminder of another meal with him just days before when Jesus performed the same action, that they were able to see who he was. Perhaps a lesson that we can study scripture and theology all we want—and those do have their place, don't get me wrong—but that is not the way to come to truly know Jesus. That is not the way we fully encounter the Risen Lord. Rather, he comes to us, he makes himself known, in simple yet unexpected ways. Most notably in acts of service and hospitality.

Closely related to how is where the Risen Lord chooses to make himself known. All other Gospels record that the initial post-resurrection appearances occur in Jerusalem. At or near the tomb where Jesus was buried. Other significant appearances occur elsewhere in Jerusalem, notably at the place where the disciples were hiding. But here, Jesus chooses to appear nowhere near Jerusalem. Rather, he chooses a dusty road in the middle of nowhere, as Cleopas and his companion travel from one place to another. As they go about their everyday business. The encounter with the Risen Lord occurs when they least expect it. The encounter occurs in a seemingly less-than spectacular ways—as they carry on conversation with an apparent stranger. As they talk about the news of the day, of the mundane things of life. As they share a meal. Again, that they—that we—encounter the Risen Lord in simple, unexpected ways. That we encounter him in the ordinary. That we encounter him in the mundane moments of our lives. That the Risen Lord might just appear in ways that are beyond our preconceptions.

Of course, we need to remain open to the possibilities of such experiences. Just as we are told happened with Cleopas and his companion after Jesus broke the bread at the dinner table: "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." Only then, in hindsight, did they realize that the signs were there all along during their journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

As we continue our celebration of the Resurrection over the remaining weeks of Eastertide, and beyond, may our eyes be open to seeing the Risen Lord as he appears to us in the ordinary

moments of our lives, as well as in unexpected ways and places. May our hearts continue to burn with Christ's presence as we walk with him on our own road to Emmaus.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!