

Second Sunday of Easter: The Road to Emmaus

A Sermon Preached at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, April 24th, 2022

During Lent we have been seeking God's ways as we journeyed with Jesus all the way to the cross on Good Friday. Then, on Easter Sunday we shared with each other the joy and wonder of Christ's resurrection—of having Christ back after we were sure he had been lost. During Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus on Easter Sunday, however, we also heard Jesus tell her not to touch him—not to hold on to him as before—but to go and tell the other apostles about his resurrection from death. Mary and the other apostles, we learned, were being called to open themselves up to the mystery and wonder of God's resurrection power as it was now going to be moving into the world.

But now what? What happens next this side of the resurrection in this great drama of Jesus and his disciples? What more did they have to learn about what God had done in raising Jesus and what would it mean for their future? During the six Sundays spanning from Easter to Pentecost, we will seek answers to this question and other questions by looking at wonder and mystery-filled stories of the apostle's encounters with the resurrected Jesus over a period of 40 days. Now where does all this business about 40 days come from? Well, at the beginning of the book of Acts, Luke writes that after Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to the disciples "during forty days" during which he spoke about "the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). After those 40 days, Jesus ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9). We have to wonder, what did Jesus teach his disciples about the kingdom of God during these 40 days and what do we, Jesus' present-day disciples, have to learn from the biblical stories that tell us of these 40 wonder-filled days? Throughout this series, we will be encouraged to listen with intention as we are taught about the kingdom of God by the resurrected Jesus **in the face of a stranger on the road, in a room behind locked doors, while eating fish by the sea, and on a mountain top.**

This morning as we enter these 40 days of wonder, we begin close to where we left off on Easter Sunday. Mary Magdalene, it seems, ran from the garden where she had encountered Jesus and found Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some other women that were with them and told them of her encounter with the risen Jesus and they believed her. Then, they all ran together to tell the other apostles. Then Mary announced: “I have seen the Lord!” The gospel of Luke tells us that many of the apostles did not believe it, thinking it was “an idle tale.” But Peter had to know for himself, so he ran to the tomb and saw that Jesus’ linen cloths were laying there with no body filling them out. This brief series of events following on the story of Mary’s encounter with Jesus in the garden help us enter the confusion, the mystery, and yes, even the ‘unbelievability’ of it all. You can almost hear one of the Apostles saying: “There’s no way.” “This isn’t the way death works, Mary.” I can also hear Mary saying, “I know how death works, bud. But something has happened here that I cannot rationally explain. I really did meet Jesus...but I didn’t recognize him at first; he was different. It was only when he said my name that I knew it really was him...that death had failed to silence him. Still, he told me not to touch him. Something’s changed. I don’t think we will have him back like before.”

The story Luke tells next in his Gospel is a story of two of the apostles who had been there when Mary and the other women had said that Jesus was alive. Incidentally, these two men needed to travel to a village called Emmaus. For what reason we don’t know, maybe one of them lived there. And along the way, they were trying to sort through what Mary’s pronouncement could mean. And then, just as Mary had encountered who she thought was a stranger in the garden, these two men also encounter a stranger along the road. As readers of Luke’s gospel, we know that this stranger is Jesus, but the travelers do not. And then, just as Jesus had started by asking Mary a question, “who are you looking for?,” Jesus asks these two apostles a question:

“what are you discussing with each other?” Just like Mary couldn’t identify Jesus, thinking him a gardener, Luke says that the apostle’s “eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Jesus is there, right in front of them, but their capacity for recognition was limited. Something within them prevented that recognition. We don’t know, at first, what it was that prevented that recognition. What the stranger on the road does next is listen to the disciples as they try to sort through the “things” that had happened over the last days they had with Jesus. They recounted to him the stories preserved throughout the gospels, about Jesus’ mighty deeds and words, and about how he was handed over to Rome to be crucified. They told the stranger how Jesus’ death had crushed their hopes that he would have been the one to deliver them from Roman oppression and who would bring in God’s kingdom on earth. And then they told him this more recent, strange string of events with Mary and the other women saying that Jesus was alive.

Surely now, we might wonder, Jesus could just say, “hey, it’s me guys! Here, look, here are the marks from the nails! It’s really me.” Instead, Jesus (the stranger) scolds the apostles on account of two character faults: their “foolishness” and their “slowness of heart.” Rather than overcoming these problems by just suddenly revealing himself to them, Jesus instead gives them an intensive course on reading the prophets. He returns to the scriptures to explain why it is that all the disciples talked about had to happen. He addresses their foolishness, you might say, through the scriptural storehouse of knowledge. We don’t exactly know how Jesus appealed to the prophets, beginning with Moses, to show that it was “necessary” that the Messiah had to suffer and then enter into his glory. Perhaps he pointed to the prophet Isaiah, with all of those rich passages in chapters 52 and 53 where Isaiah speaks of the servant of Israel who will be “wounded for our transgressions, [and] crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). While we don’t know exactly what Jesus taught them, we find out late that as Jesus was teaching them, their

hearts were “burning” within them and that this was an important step along the way for them to believe that Jesus was alive. But even so, even after that intensive course and the first quickening of their hearts, he remained hidden to them. What is going to make the difference, we wonder? When are they finally going to see that he is right in front of them?

It wasn't until they were around the table with them; it wasn't until he broke bread like he had done only nights earlier, that their eyes were opened and there was recognition. While for Mary it was Jesus speaking her name, for these apostles it was Jesus breaking the bread. It was sharing the bread and the cup that opened their eyes. Remember how Jesus had said at the last supper, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). It wasn't until Jesus broke bread with them that remembrance led to recognition. As he taught from the scriptures, the apostle's hearts were burning, but the veil remained on their faces until that personal, mundane act of breaking and blessing bread. It was Jesus the Messiah's story, put into flesh through the down-to-earth meal, the earthy fellowship shared around the table, that peeled the scales off their eyes. “Jesus! It's you!”

And yet again, just like with Mary, the recognition of Jesus with them did not lead to an extended “holding on to Jesus” as before. He wasn't now going to stay with them, to share that meal as before. They could not touch him either. Knowing he was returning to God, Jesus met them in their need for knowledge from the scriptures, to be sure, but most importantly he met them in their need for hearts quickened and eyes opened through fellowship. And then he was gone. It is a strange and wonder-filled story.

So, what does this story have to teach us? Or, better yet, maybe we should say, *where are we in this story?* I look forward to all of your thoughts, this morning, in worship response time, but for now let me suggest that we are a lot like the travelers we met in this story. We are

walking along the road of life, with hopes and dreams that we long for God to address, with heavy pain and unfulfilled dreams that that we carry, and amidst it all we hear the strange and confounding news that Jesus has risen. We too are trying to sort it all out, how it could be, and what it all means for us. We are on a journey; we have not arrived, and we have so much still to learn. If this Emmaus story can teach us today, perhaps it can do so by reminding us that like the apostles, we probably often encounter Jesus and don't even know it because we have a veil over our eyes. The veil could take many forms: the veil of a limited or stifled imagination; the veil of busyness; the veil of stereotype; or the veil of independence, to name just a few. Admittedly, there is no way to go through this life of ours with clear sight all the time. As the apostle Paul suggests, it is just part of our human existence that we will often see things as in a "mirror, dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12). But the Emmaus story suggests that our vision is clarified, our eyes are opened, when we dwell in the scriptures, search out the wisdom of God there, and most importantly, do this while breaking and blessing bread together—with strangers and with friends. It is in those moments of holy fellowship that we begin slowly to learn in our hearts what it means to say: Christ is risen!

May we, throughout the remainder of this series on "40 days of Wonder," have our eyes opened and our hearts quickened through such learning and holy fellowship, so that we may encounter the risen Jesus in the most mundane and most unexpected of places. AMEN.

Benediction - VT 1066

May the Christ who walks
On wounded feet
Walk with you on the road.
May the Christ who serves
With wounded hands
Stretch out your hands to serve.
May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart
Open your hearts to love.
May you see the face of Christ
In everyone you meet,
And may everyone you meet
See the face of Christ in you.