

sermon-4/6/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Experiencing Easter”
Luke 24:13-35

I don't know if this has ever happened to you, but I suspect it is a common occurrence. You are in the grocery store and you see someone from church or work and you don't recognize them. They may look familiar, but you can't quite place them or remember their name.

That has happened to me many times and from both perspectives. I see parishioners out in public. They are not in the usual context of the Church and I can't quite place them. On the other side of that, I have gone up to people in my church and said hello, and they look quizzical at first before they realize it is me. One, surprised to see me in the grocery store, even said, “Well I suppose even you need to shop for groceries!”

That kind of experience is just a reminder we often only see what we expect to see. Conversely, we do not see what we don't expect to see. Context is very important. Sometimes what we expect can blind us to the unexpected. Often we are the poorer for it.

Our inability to see beyond what we expect is critical when it comes to our spiritual lives. We can miss an experience of God, in Christ, coming to us in the midst of our normal activities if we are not open to seeing the depth dimension of our lives in the midst of our normal routines.

Our scripture text for today, the Road to Emmaus story, helps us see this clearly. These two disciples, Cleopas, and the other unnamed one, are in shock. Jesus has been crucified. He was dead. That is what they expected. Resurrection was not even in the realm of what they thought was possible. Consequently they knew only grief, anger, fear, and hopelessness. They could not see beyond those emotions.

Fred Buechner talks about this road to Emmaus passage. He says Emmaus is “any place we go to escape the dominating power of death.” It is “wherever we go, whatever we do to forget that the world holds nothing sacred.”

Most of us, then, are quite familiar with the road to Emmaus. We have walked this road after the death of a loved one. We have walked this road after a fragile hope has been disappointed, when the idealism of youth has been crushed by the cynical realities of power, when family issues have stripped us of any illusion that we are competent parents or spouses, when we get in over our heads at work, and want to run, you name it. We are all familiar with the road to Emmaus.

When we walk this dark and lonely road, what we need most is an experience of hope, an experience that life has meaning even when it hurts us, an experience of presence that heals and encourages. Ultimately what we need is an experience of Easter, of the resurrected Christ and the new life that presence brings.

This text in Luke is about how we might experience the resurrected Christ. When we read about what the early disciples experienced that first Easter day, we can learn from their experience. What is most clear is that those disciples, and the early church in the following years, experienced resurrection. It changed their lives. But, we need to be clear here. They did not have an uninterrupted experience of the risen Christ.

Look at this text in Luke 24. It is filled with absence and presence. The two disciples first experience Jesus' absence most profoundly. Then they don't recognize the presence even though the risen Christ is walking with them. Suddenly they do recognize him and then he is gone. Absence, blindness and presence are all part of the experience of the early church. They are all part of our experience.

Those moments of profound presence are fleeting indeed and beyond our control. When they happen they are a gift. Those moments when God's presence is recognized and felt touch us in ways and places that change us and form us. We can point back to those moments and find the courage to keep going when all we experience is absence. Like Cleopas and his friend, we can point back to moments when at the time we were blind to, or could not name what we were experiencing as God's presence, but our hearts burned within when we think back.

The Bible is very clear that we are not in control. We can't manufacture God's presence no matter how skillful we create a worship experience, no matter how amazingly we pray, no matter how good we try to be. Our relationship with God is not about us whistling and then God coming to greet us.

No, it is more about a gracious God who is always with us, walking alongside of us, but we do not have eyes to see, or hearts that are open to the unexpected. So we need to do things to clear our eyes and open our hearts.

This text gives us three things we might do to open ourselves to the reality of the resurrection. The first is taking scripture seriously. The early church did a whole lot of wrestling with scripture, looking at familiar passages with fresh eyes. Luke, as one commentator notes, compressed this reevaluating scripture with the help of God's Spirit, into one afternoon on the road to Emmaus. The risen Christ was the Bible study teacher. God's Spirit is still teaching us when we gather together in the Church to read and study the scriptures.

Hospitality plays a significant role here as well. Those two disciples offered hospitality to the stranger. They invited him to stay with them. The Bible has several stories where hospitality is offered and the host was actually entertaining angels or God in disguise. Radical hospitality is a long-standing practice in the Church. It is an act that makes possible our recognizing God's presence in the stranger.

And finally, and perhaps most significantly, we can recognize God's presence in the sacrament of communion. When we read carefully this text, we can hear echoes of

communion as the risen Christ takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. Sounds like what we do, and will do this morning when we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Interestingly, the risen Christ, disguised as a stranger, switches places with the disciples. They thought they were hosting the stranger. Instead Christ is the host at the table. They thought they were giving a gift to the stranger. Instead, God was giving them the gift of presence in that meal.

And so we come this day to this holy meal where Christ is spiritually present if we have but eyes to see and hearts to feel that presence. It is a meal that nourishes us all on whatever road to Emmaus we may be walking. Even when we walk down the difficult road of goodbyes, we know that God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen