

April 11, 2010
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Recognizing the Risen Lord
Luke 24:13-35

A Prayer of Confession

O God, your love is boundless and your grace exceeds our imaginations. You keep finding ways to be among us even when our hearts are hidden. You continue to seek us out even when the doors of our souls are locked. We cannot hide from your presence. We confess, however, that we are not always receptive to your presence. We get caught up in our own plans and the noise of our own urgencies. Correct our vision. Cleanse our hearts. Create in us a place where we can welcome you and receive the fullness of what you have given us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

He asked them, "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

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 {Or [the Christ]} 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.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. 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; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Message

As we come to the second Sunday of Easter, we often ask ourselves how people like us living 2000 years after the death and resurrection of Christ are able to experience his presence in our daily lives. It was for people like us that the story of "The Road to Emmaus" was written.

The story begins with two of Jesus' disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. They are probably returning home after the Passover, but they are headed home with a sense of emptiness and dejection. All their

hopes have been dashed by the sudden arrest and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, their leader. They had hoped he would emancipate Israel from the power of the Roman occupation forces, but were shocked to realize that their own national leaders had betrayed him and handed him over to the Romans to be crucified. Their dreams were dashed and there was nothing to do but to head home. Another person joins them on their walk, but they don't recognize who he is.

We often tend not to see what we don't expect to see. We helped a Japanese student come to the University of Denver several years ago. Yoshinori was his name, and he was here for several months when we got a fax saying that his mother was coming to Denver with a group of people from her church but not to tell Yoshinori because she wanted to surprise him. So I called him and told him some people were coming from his church in Japan and I needed him to go out to the airport to help me pick them up. We went out and met the group. His mother walked right past him, and he did not recognize her. We started walking toward baggage claim with her in front of him, and suddenly he said, "Mother." He had not expected to see his mother and so he didn't see her until suddenly he did see her.

These disciples don't realize that the person who joined them is Jesus so they continue walking and talking. As they visit with him they are shocked to find that this person knows nothing about the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. And so they tell him how Jesus had been a prophet mighty in word and deed and how the Jewish leaders fearing his influence had turned him over to the Roman leaders for crucifixion when everyone had hoped that he would be the one to rescue Israel from Roman oppression. They also reported that some of their women had gone to the tomb which was empty and had seen angels who told them that Jesus was alive, but that they had not believed the women.

Then this stranger scolds them and begins to show them from scripture how it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer all these things and then enter into glory. I don't know what passages the stranger pointed out to them. Perhaps he talked about how Moses had ordered that the sins of the people be placed on a scapegoat and then the scapegoat sent to suffer certain death outside the city walls.

Or maybe he quoted Isaiah 53:6-9:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Later in the story we read that their hearts burned within them as he was showing them how the Messiah had to suffer. I have a hard time understanding how anyone who experienced the trial and death of Jesus could not help make connections to this passage in Isaiah. If I was seeing the connection between Isaiah 53 and the passion of our Lord for the first time, my heart would burn because it still does when I read these verses and realize who closely they predict what actually happened to Jesus.

And so the travelers come to Emmaus and they persuade this stranger to stay the evening with them and continue on the next day. And then a very strange thing happens. He is a guest at their table but he takes the bread as if he is the host. He takes it, he blesses it, he breaks it, and he gives it to them. And suddenly they recognize the stranger, none other than Jesus himself who then suddenly vanishes out of their sight. They are so shocked and excited that they go all the way back to Jerusalem that night to tell the other disciples. When they get there they find that Jesus has appeared to Peter, too, and that everyone is starting to realize that Jesus is alive.

Now there are two aspects of this story that bear special attention.

1. Why were the two disciples prevented from recognizing Jesus when they first saw him?
2. Why did he disappear as soon as they did recognize him?

If they had recognized him, they would have recognized him by sight and sound. That is the way we recognize people. When we answer the phone we recognize someone by the sound of their voice. When we are at school we recognize people by sight.

But can we recognize Jesus in that way? Does Jesus appear to us visually or speak to us audibly. Not normally. That is not to say that he cannot or does not, but just to say that that is not the usual way he reveals himself to us, not the usual way we recognize him.

So, to give us a story we can identify with and learn from, these disciples are prevented from recognizing Jesus by the sight of his face or the sound of his voice. They are in the same boat as we are. They have to recognize Jesus in some other manner.

What is this other manner of recognition? How do Christians recognize Jesus and commune with him if not by sight and sound?

There are three ways we experience Jesus 2000 years after his death and resurrection.

The first is that we experience Jesus when he comes to us in the study of scripture. The 66 books of the Bible are there for us to read and thereby experience God's presence in our lives. Peter who saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain tells us that we would do well to be attentive to scripture as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts. We have a saying, "When all else fails, try reading the instructions." We might just as easily say, "When you have not felt the presence of Jesus in your life, try reading scripture."

There were many followers of Jesus in the early church who had never seen Jesus. Peter writes of them, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." They experienced Jesus by reading the Old Testament scriptures and by hearing about him from eyewitnesses like Peter who along with the other disciples wrote the New Testament.

One of the best ways to experience Jesus is to join a small group Bible study. Jesus has promised that wherever two or three are gathered together, there he will be in their midst. When we study the Bible with others we gain insights from the perspective of other readers and sometimes find our "hearts burning with us" as we recognize the presence of Jesus in their lives and ours.

The second way we experience Jesus is as he comes to us in the sacrament.

Alan Culpepper writes:

The church experiences the continuing presence of the risen Lord when it gathers at the Lord's Table. The two travelers had not recognized the risen Lord when he appeared to them, but at the table they saw who he was. Later believers may not have the opportunity to experience an appearance of Jesus, but they can see him clearly in Moses and the prophets and know that he is present when they share their bread with a stranger or gather for the Lord's Supper. The appearance experience, therefore, is no spiritual Camelot locked in the past but a sign of the ways in which the risen Lord continues to be present with his disciples.

Jesus set up the practice of a meal when we would all gather together and we would receive grace from him in the form of the bread and the cup. It is not for us an empty ritual but a real experience of Jesus' love for us and of his presence in our lives.

When I am at a retreat center and receive the sacrament early in the day, it is the first thing to pass through my lips and stays with me the entire day. There is a mystical blessing to the Lord's Supper which cannot be reduced to the mere ingestion of juice and bread. Jesus is present when we follow his instructions to remember him at his table.

The third way that Jesus comes to us is in the tedium of our daily lives. We try to avoid dead time or tedious tasks but there is a benefit to walking seven miles like these disciples did or working with our hands because this allows us time to reflect, to pray, and to ponder the meaning of the events of our lives. I am not talking about the bright sunny days when we decide to take the dog for a long walk, although those are good times to pray and visit with Jesus. I am talking about the drudgery of life, being stuck in traffic or restricted to bed rest, or stuck in front of a computer screen entering meaningless letters and numbers. Brother Lawrence said that God was often as close to him as he scrubbed pots and pans in the kitchen as when he was partaking of the sacrament.

Mrs Elizabeth Rebecca Ward who wrote poems almost a hundred years ago under the pen name Fay

Inchfawn gave us these wonderful words:

*Sometimes, when everything goes wrong;
When days are short and nights are long;
When wash-day brings so dull a sky
That not a single thing will dry.
And when the kitchen chimney smokes,
And when there's naught so 'lame' as folks!
When friends deplore my faded youth,
And when the baby cuts a tooth.
While John, the baby last but one,
Clings round my skirts till day is done;
And fat, good-tempered Jane is glum,
And butcher's man forgets to come.
Sometimes I say on days like these,
I get a sudden gleam of bliss.
Not on some sunny day of ease,
He'll come ... but on a day like this!*

Benediction

I pray that as our good Lord Jesus has given you the grace to drink with joy from the cup of salvation that you will diligently seek Him in the words of Holy Scripture which shine as a light in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. Amen.