

April 23, 2017 Easter 2
Luke 24:13-35 Stay With Us!

I sat in my office with two colleagues as together we pondered and explored the Emmaus story. There were an unusual number of silences as together we entered into the story and shared with one another through the lens of our own life experiences. After awhile we were no longer simply speaking out of our heads-- our thoughts, our memories. As we connected that ancient story with our own, we found ourselves touching into something deeper and more profound. We had stumbled our way into sacred space. It was as if the risen Christ had, without announcement, quietly joined our circle and begun instructing our hearts. Tears gathered at the corners of our eyes as we each sensed a holy presence finding expression among us in the sharing of our stories and our faith. For the briefest of moments, Emmaus entered our lives-- And then we went for lunch.

The Emmaus story has a familiar ring to it. Many of us have been where those early disciples find themselves in this morning's reading. We know what it is like to have our expectations, hopes and dreams suddenly shattered. In one way or another, we too have had our lives, our expectations, and hopes disrupted by sudden and unanticipated loss.

Our best friend announces that she isn't enjoying the friendship any longer; our spouse finally retires and instead of that long anticipated trip to Europe, we find ourselves at a graveside; a policeman arrives at the door in the middle of the night with news no parent ever wants to hear; we arrive at work expecting a promotion and find ourselves escorted to the door; we are in the prime of life and we receive an unexpected diagnosis. Suddenly all bets are off, and we find ourselves reeling and trying to make sense of what has happened.

As it was for those early disciples, so it is for many of us-- when the realities of our lives become difficult to bear and beyond our ability to comprehend, we need to get outside, put our feet on solid ground, breathe deeply, and clear our heads. Often, we find ourselves talking with a trusted friend, and together trying to make sense of our lives in light of what that has happened. We scour our memories in search of missed warning signs, and often, and with the benefit of hindsight, and the precious gift of hearing one another into speech, those missed signs come into view. We wonder, "How could I have missed it? How could I not have known this was coming? I saw it, I heard it, I sensed it, but I just didn't see it coming.

So we find the disciples walking along the Emmaus road, talking, sharing all that has happened, along with their broken hopes and hearts, and their fears with one another-- trying to make sense of it all.

We imagine the silences that fall between them--as they do between us, when we are lost in our own stories of grief and disappointment. We catch the poignancy in their response to the stranger's question: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." We know something about disappointed hopes.

The stranger, after listening to their story, begins to weave the events of the last days into the larger faith story of their people. Slowly they begin to see the warp and woof of Jesus' life and theirs, woven into the tapestry of Israel's salvation history. Their hearts begin to burn within them... was it hope.. being rekindled in their hearts? When they come to the place where they turn off the main road towards home, they invite the stranger to come and stay the night. Even in the midst of their grief and confusion, they do not forget to practice hospitality. Hospitality is a silver thread that runs through all their lives.

As they sit down for their evening meal, Jesus, who has entered their home as their guest, suddenly assumes the role of host. He takes the bread, blesses, breaks, and shares it. Suddenly minds and hearts are opened, and they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. The risen Christ is truly in their midst.

In the end, it is not the stranger's words that lift the veil from their eyes; rather it is his movements. Taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing bread is his signature move. It is what he is known for!

Richard Swanson writes about a course he was teaching on the Gospels. He had asked the students as they had studied each gospel to imagine the face of Jesus in each. When he posed the question for the 3rd gospel, Luke's gospel, a very large hand shot up-- way up. The hand belonged to an unusually quiet student, a big guy, a linebacker on the school's football team. It was the first time he had spoken. "Jesus was a big guy," he said, "Goes 260, maybe 280 pounds." "He's a big guy," he repeated. "In the gospel of Luke, he's always eating." "That's like the Emmaus thing," he said, "They only recognize him when he breaks the bread for the meal. It's like he didn't look like himself unless he had a chicken leg in his hand." Swanson agrees: "This is a good reading of Luke's story."

Again and again, throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus has sat at table with those who would share a meal with him, and he has become their host. That is why each time we share in communion in this place, I remind us all that this is the table of Jesus Christ, and that he is our host. In the simple acts of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing bread the church has continued to call forth Christ's presence for well over 2000 years. Each time we say the words, "This is my body broken for you," or, "This is the bread of life." With these actions and these words, I or any other minister, priest, or pastor are meant to momentarily disappear from your sight, so that for the briefest of moments, it is Christ, and only Christ who stands at the table offering to each one of us, his body, the bread and sustenance of our spiritual lives. Then, as now, as soon as we recognize him, he disappears from our sight.

Our glimpses of the holy are fleeting. Yet, they can turn an ordinary day into a well of deep joy. So it is that as soon as those ancient disciples recognize him, the risen Christ vanishes from their sight.

In times of deep challenge and change, we struggle to make sense of our lives, our losses, and we wonder and worry about the future. We struggle simply to begin placing one in front of the other again. The way ahead for us, as it was for those ancient disciples, is to move back into life, with a deeper and broader understanding— with restored confidence and a renewed faith in tow.

When Jesus takes, breaks, blesses and shares the bread he lays down the pattern for us. And so it is that as we gather from week to week, we take, bless, break open and share the words of scripture, the bread of life, and the stories of our lives and our world. In the process, we discover that our very lives are meant to be continuously transformed into that ancient pattern. We are called into the world to be a people taken, blessed, broken, and shared—a people willing to offer our lives in loving service, offering ourselves as living bread to a world hungering for God. Today, as we gather as part of our looking forward together to our life and ministry as a congregation, we will do well to remember this pattern. It is meant to be the pattern of our life together as followers of the risen Christ.

"Christ is risen!" they shouted on that day. Let us join our voices to theirs with a glad response, "Christ is risen, indeed!"

Dawna Markova

I will not die an unlived life.
I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open me,
to make me less afraid,
more accessible,
to loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise.

Big Guy Story from **Provoking the Gospel of Luke, Year C**, Richard Swanson, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland 2006, pg 140-141.