

St. Paul's Congregational Church
April 30, 2017, Luke 24:13-35 (Easter 3A)
On the Road
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Bible is full of stories that will help us build our relationship with God: from the prophets of the Old Testament, to the coming of Jesus the Messiah – teacher, redeemer, leader who walks with us on our journey of faith. These are accounts of many astonishing events: healings, exorcisms, the raising of Lazarus, the multiplication of loaves and fishes, the sky opening up with the voice of God speaking. Nothing is more astonishing than the Easter story, though: and 2 weeks after the great festival, we like those disciples, continue to try to make sense of it, to be hopefully transformed by it. All of these are powerful, but no more powerful than this one from Luke about the Emmaus Road: a simple story of two people in grief, shock, and their journey to transformation.

It was late afternoon when Jesus died - surrounded by the people who had loved him, who wanted to be near him as he suffered and then finally died. Then it was all over – and the next day was Saturday, the Sabbath.

The day after a death is a numb day, a formal day, a mechanical day, but as empty as it feels, it's also full. Full of wonderings, replays, noise within ourselves that just won't quit. For Jesus' friends, this day fell on the Sabbath – a day when their activity is limited by the law. All they could do was think. And feel. And hurt. And wonder. They'd close their eyes and see the three crosses; they'd hear the sounds, sounds of suffering, the cries of thirst, the voices of those gathered in the heat. Just like us, aren't they, as they relive, replay events over and over again – every one of the senses is involved. The disciples, just like us, can't turn it off.

But maybe for Jesus' followers, the worst day was the next day. The Sabbath is over, life returns to normal, the shops open, activity resumes. They'd heard the rumors – the women had come back from the tomb with all kinds of wild stories – too wild to be true. The disciples can't help but wonder, will his life and death make any difference in the world at all? He's made such great promises – people had turned to him and placed all their greatest hopes in him. But now he was dead. How to make sense of all this!

For these two followers, they could do nothing else but get out of town, to get away, to try to escape. They make their way from one place – of hope turned into despair, a place of questions, the unbelievable stories of the women – to another place, some where maybe they can find some peace – they head to Emmaus.

What happened on that dirty, dusty, lonely road to Emmaus? It's the beginning of a transition from blindness to sight, faithlessness to faith, sadness to joy – looking backward from our perspective, we know that this is the time when the Easter story intrudes into the lives of real people. That their eyes are opened and they see the Risen Lord in their midst. It's the time when hope returns, when joy returns, and their faith explodes into action – the action of telling others what they've seen and experienced.

The more I reflect on this story, the more I can't help but relate it to the journey we're on here at St. Paul's as well - and this Easter season is just the right time to do that. Because we're on a journey to Emmaus too - not just as individuals, but as church, a community of people gathered to be in relationship with God. As individuals and church grieving about what once was. As individuals and church trying to hold on to what once was, but at the same time, on some level, realizing that's not possible - and the challenge of facing that and all the emotion that goes along with that. We understand the emotions those disciples were feeling, don't we. And we too yearn for a sense of purpose, a sense of hope, a sense of joy - just like those two disciples who set out on that dusty, dirty road.

Friends, that Easter resurrection promise is for us too! That Easter story can and will intrude on our lives as well - if we have the eyes to see. If we are willing to walk through the pain - not around it - and meet the Risen Lord in our midst. Because Jesus is right here with us - walking with us. That's the awesome good news of Easter, isn't it. For us too, it can be the time when hope returns, when joy returns, and our faith explodes into action - the action of telling others what we've seen and experienced.

But this story isn't about us. It's about God. It's a story about what God does - not what those two followers did, or what we can do. It's about God's action. It's about the fact that in Jesus' resurrection, God is calling those followers, God is calling us, to a level of experience none of us have ever known before. God continually calls us human beings out of our narrow, private worlds, into God's larger plan.

Today the Easter story becomes more than an anniversary celebration - it intrudes into the lives of real people, calling forth worship, confession, repentance, communion, transformation, obedience and mutual love. And all of this starts on that dusty, dirty, lonely road to Emmaus, and it starts for us too, right here, right now at St. Paul's Place here in Nutley, New Jersey. So let's join in that journey.

The two followers set out and they talk - about the strange and sad events they've lived through. They become aware of footsteps behind them and they are joined by a stranger. He asks them what they're talking about and they stop, terribly sad, and look at him. Cleopas says, "How can you not know what's happened? You must be the only one who hasn't heard!"

The stranger says, "What things? What happened?"

So as they walk along, the followers tell their story to this stranger. Maybe we have to tell our story too - maybe our building feels a bit like the empty tomb. And as we tell our story, that stranger walking with us will enlarge our perspective like he did for those disciples - broadens their story to include parts they hadn't thought of, including parts we haven't thought of.

It takes Jesus - the Risen Christ - to explain the meaning of the story - the long story of God's purpose for Israel. The resurrection is not just a miracle story of a revived corpse - it's so much bigger than that. In it the plan and reign of God are fulfilled. Here we see God's action drawing these two men out of their narrow private worlds into the larger story. And God will do that for us too!

So the three of them continue walking that long and dusty road, talking, listening, but the two of them still don't recognize the stranger, do they. Now it's getting late. They persuade the stranger to stop and have supper with them. An act of hospitality, of

invitation. They invite Jesus in. And isn't that what Jesus has been teaching throughout all his ministry? Healing. Hospitality.

They gather at the table for supper but it is now that Jesus becomes the host. Listen to Luke's words: he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. Took. Blessed. Broke. Gave. The language of the Lord's supper. And here's the transformation: the presence of Christ at a table opened to a stranger transforms an ordinary supper into a sacrament. Their eyes were opened. And it is now they recognize the stranger as the Risen Christ in their midst. They come to know him in both Word and Sacrament. Just like we can. Just like we do. God's action. Not theirs. Not ours.

But then he vanishes from their sight. Frederick Buechner says, "They could not nail him down. And that is how it always is. We can never nail him down, not even if the nails we use are real ones and the thing we nail him to is the cross. He comes suddenly, out of nowhere, like the first clear light of the sun after a thunderstorm. Or maybe like the thunder itself. And maybe we recognize him, and maybe we do not, and our lives are never the same again, either because we did not recognize him or because we did."

Can you imagine the scene? They wonder why they didn't recognize him earlier. And they say, "Didn't our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road?"

The burning of their hearts: the burning of the heart that signals transformation, deepening of perception, recognition.

What makes your heart burn? What makes our heart here at St. Paul's burn?

How do we, you and I, know when Christ is talking to us on the road? How, perhaps even more importantly, will we recognize him when he walks with us? Because he is walking with us! Do we open our eyes and see?

In our passage, then, the followers return to Jerusalem – it was late after their meal with Jesus – but they rushed back in the night to find the other disciples and tell the story again, but this time it's different. Something big, something really huge has happened – it's burned into their hearts and they have to tell someone! So they told the others how Jesus was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

That's what evangelism is – telling someone the good news! Does this story burn in our hearts enough to want to share it?

This is a strange story – in fact all the stories about how Jesus appeared after his death and resurrection are strange. Maybe the strangest thing is that they are so unglamorous. No choirs of angels. No star. No shepherds coming in the middle of the night. No kings arriving from the east with precious gifts. Here we simply have two men walking along a dusty road.

It's so ordinary. Ordinary daily activity. But that's when, that's where Jesus is apt to come – in the very midst of our ordinary lives. In the midst of people, in the midst of real life. In the midst of questions that real life asks every day.

Every one of us has traveled the road to Emmaus. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget, dull the pain. Maybe trying to keep things the same – familiar, safe, stuck in routines, mourning the loss of people we used to see in worship every week, the sounds of so many children in our classes. All of this is escape and we can escape for a while from our troubles, our pain, our disappointments.

But is that what God wants from us? I don't believe that.

What we cannot escape as we travel together on that road to Emmaus is life itself and it's exactly at times like these that Jesus comes, in the very midst of life that's real and inescapable. It's when we look and listen with our hearts, with all our being and imagination – it's then that our hearts burn within us.

Again, Buechner: “what we may see is Jesus Himself, what we may hear is the first faint sound of a voice somewhere deep within us saying that there is a purpose in this life, in our lives, whether we can understand it completely or not. And that this purpose follows behind us through all our doubting and being afraid, through all our indifference and boredom, to a moment when suddenly we know for sure that everything does make sense because everything is in the hands of God, one of whose names is forgiveness. Another is love. This is what the stories about Jesus' coming back to life mean – because Jesus was, is, the love of God, alive among us. And not even all the cruelty and blindness of men could kill him.”

Let's take the risk and allow ourselves to be transformed. Let's allow Jesus to meet us where we are. Let's talk together on this dusty road – let's talk about our anxieties and our dreams about the future ministry of St. Paul's. Let's listen for Jesus speaking among us – let's feel our hearts burn in us with the good news Jesus brings. And then let's tell the others - with all the hope and joy those disciples felt.

God always surprises us. On dusty roads. At 10 St. Paul's Place. In this town. And at the table. May we be open to the surprise of Jesus walking alongside of us – he's always with us, you know. Something wonderful has happened and is about to happen! Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Amen.