

MORNING PRAYER EASTER III St. Alban's Staten Island

April 26, 2020 (Zoom service)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

It's somewhat surprising that today's gospel is from Luke rather than John whose gospel is pre-eminent in Eastertide. However, the story related here of Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaus is one of the most beloved of all post-Resurrection readings in the New Testament, and there are very good reasons for including it even if it deviates from the usual pattern. Clearly, it is one of the great literary treasures in Luke's account.

Luke's gospel is the longest of the four canonical gospels and is also the longest book in all of the New Testament. Most scholars believe that Luke and Acts are two sections of a two-part work authored by the same writer. That author is assumed to be Luke the Evangelist, a companion of Paul. This account was written toward the end of the first century and the early years of the second, sometime between approximately 80 and 110 A.D. It seems to have been composed for an educated Greek-speaking (and therefore largely Gentile) audience and was meant to be read aloud in small gatherings of Jesus-followers assembled to celebrate the Eucharist.

I mention these things in order to make a point. Namely, that by the time Luke's account was written, "most of the early church was composed of Christians who had not witnessed Christ in the flesh." That generation would have been largely gone from the scene. But what is important here is that this particular story would have connected them in a powerful way with their Lord. It also revealed God's overall plan for mankind as revealed in scripture while focusing on the Lord's Supper, the

sacrament then being developed and celebrated in small gatherings of Jesus-followers. Part of the purpose of the story would have been to demonstrate that "later disciples were not at a disadvantage because they were not contemporaries of Jesus" or actual witnesses to the Resurrection.

This is not to suggest that the story was invented for these purposes but rather to note the placement of the account in the context of Luke's gospel. After all, there would have been many, many stories about Jesus that were circulating in the early church. The choice among multiple sources, then, tells us something about the audience for whom this gospel was composed. And it tells us something about the interests and motivations of the group to whom the gospel was directed so that it is part and parcel of the story of the early growth of the church.

It is also a story which recalls a familiar tale from the Old Testament, that of the angels' appearance to Abraham and Sarah in the Book of Genesis. In both stories, the hosts fail to recognize the significance of their guests, but extend hospitality nevertheless. In part because hospitality was a key value of the peoples of the Middle East in the first century. But also because we witness here the power of hospitality to lead to revelation and greater understanding, a level of comprehension not otherwise easily attainable. And revelation led to blessing.

The risen Christ "is revealed through the telling of the story, the interpretation of scripture, and the breaking of the bread." In fact, this account depends upon "highly liturgical language," the kind we are familiar with from our weekly celebration of the Eucharist. For example, it includes the following expressions: "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them;" "The Lord has risen indeed;" and "the breaking of the bread." In reading this story, then, we are linked to the very origins of our faith two millennia ago.

Why did Cleopas and his companion not see that the stranger was Jesus? The passage tells us that “their eyes *were kept from* recognizing him.” Thus, it is God who kept them from recognition. Later, when Jesus was breaking bread with them, “their eyes were opened” so that they recognized their Lord. The passage makes clear that it was God who veiled their eyes and God who unveils them.

We also learn here that the “chief priests and our rulers delivered (Jesus) up to be condemned to death.” So, only the Jewish leaders are held responsible; there is no special role assigned to the Romans who by law were the only authority permitted to execute prisoners. The blaming is already beginning in the gospel accounts themselves: traditional Jew vs. Jesus-follower; Jesus-follower vs. traditional Jew. All we can do is use care in reading these accounts from our modern perspective, to allow for an understandable but unfortunately high level of animosity growing up between the Orthodox community and Jews in general which is evidenced by the expulsion of the Jesus followers from the synagogues.

When Jesus explains scripture to the two strangers, they admit that they had been hoping for another outcome. Namely, that Israel would be redeemed, liberated from her foreign occupiers. In other words, in this way we are reminded that the Jews were expecting an altogether different kind of Messiah from the one God had in mind for his people. If they had been expecting redemption through their Messiah, Jesus was teaching them about a new kind of redemption, that of the suffering Servant, the one who willingly gives up his life for love of the world.

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Some authorities believe that the story of the road to Emmaus is “a counterpoint to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.” Lazarus lay outside the rich man’s gate, but the rich man did not acknowledge him or agree to help him. By contrast, the Emmaus disciples show hospitality to Jesus and are “rewarded with a private audience with the risen Lord.”

Although the travelers recognize that the Jesus they followed was a prophet, because Israel historically had ignored or persecuted those sent by God to warn them to return to God's purposes. But clearly this does not go far enough in describing their Lord. He is certainly a prophet, but the point is that he is also the Son of God. That message has not yet gotten through to Cleopas and his companion. But the writer is making clear the distinction between seeing only the average prophet in Jesus ~~and~~ seeing him rightly as the Messiah.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of this story is the way in which it suggests how it is that we continue to encounter Jesus in similar ways. Jesus met the two disciples on the road. He didn't invite them on a holy pilgrimage. He met them where they were: "on the road, amid their journey, right smack in the middle of all the pain, frustration, and despondency that threatens to overwhelm them." Isn't this the way most of us truly encounter the risen Lord? When we least expect it. When we are least prepared. When we are least understanding. When life is getting in the way of our reaching out to him. So that instead he reaches out to us. And we don't recognize him until later. We don't comprehend what has happened until after the fact when the smoke has cleared and more sober analysis helps us recollect and reconstruct our experience. When we come to know our Savior, it is God who opens our eyes.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

Amen.

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(Sources: Richard Neil Donovan, "Biblical Commentary Luke 24:13-35," <http://sermonwriter.com>, 2012; Brian Stoffregen, "Luke 24: 13-35 – 3rd Sunday of Easter – Year A," *Exegetical Notes*, www.crossmarks.com; David Lose, "Our Road to Emmaus," www.workingpreacher.org, 2011; Sarah Henrich, "Commentary on Luke 24: 13-35," *RCL Narrative*, www.workingpreacher.org; Scott Hoezee, "Easter 3A-Luke 24: 13-35," Center for Excellence in Preaching, <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu>; Eric Barreto, "Commentary on Luke 24:13-35," *RCL Narrative*, www.workingpreacher.org)

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