

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
April 6, 2008

Luke 24:13-35

One of the appointed lessons in the lectionary for this third Sunday of Easter is from the gospel according to Luke. The writer of Luke is the only gospel writer to tell about this particular encounter with the risen Jesus known as the Emmaus Road story. Listen to this resurrection narrative found in the Gospel of Luke.

Luke 24:13-49

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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?" ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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.

²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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." ²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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

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scriptures to us?”³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Of all the resurrection appearances of Jesus, this is one of the most intimate. It is also surprising that these two walking the road to Emmaus are not members of the inner circle of disciples. We know very little about them. In our world we might call them nobodies...common folk with no claim to fame. Only one is named, Cleopas. The other remains a mystery.

What strikes us first is the nature of this encounter with the risen Jesus. He takes the initiative to join these pilgrims but not with pressured intrusion. He is open yet courteous, engaging them in conversation and giving them the opportunity to disengage or even dismiss him. When they arrive at the village, he again gives them the option of asking him to stay or not. Jesus is a matchless role for spiritual good manners.

Jesus draws them out knowing that they so desperately need to talk about the recent happenings in Jerusalem. He asks them a couple of leading questions and they pour out their hearts to him about the execution of this prophet in whom they had placed so much hope, about the empty tomb and the incredible tale from some of the women that this same prophet is alive. Jesus listens deeply to them and then unfolds the scriptures to them in a way must have begun to awaken their awareness. But the most telling detail is that they fail to recognize Jesus. Consumed by their own bewilderment and despair, they need something more to bring them fully aware.

That is part of our humanness as well—being consumed by our own bewilderment and our own sense of unworthiness in the presence of God to the point that we do not see God walking with us as we walk the road from here to there in our lives. It took a simple earthly meal to open their eyes to the Jesus that stood before them. It took something common and part of daily life to shake them from their despair.

Throughout our lives, there are moments that open our eyes, open our hearts and make it possible for us to experience a fresh taste of God’s love for us. In his book, “Divine Nobodies”, Jim Palmer describes such an experience for him. Jim,

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spending an afternoon in one of his favorite places, the library, awakens to a reality of God that changes his life.

All decked out in a pretty pink dress with white lace was a sweet little girl in a wheelchair. Her angel face was radiantly pale, and her sandy blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail sporting a big yellow bow. Frilly white stockings disappeared into her sturdy white leather dress shoes, which were strapped down tight to the folding metal rests beneath her pigeon-toed feet. I could not turn away from this portrait of mangled beauty, despite knowing well enough that it isn't polite to stare at handicapped kids.

Kneeling down close beside the little girl is Dad. With one arm gently wrapped around her, he reads from an oversized storybook propped up in her lap. Slumped over against his shoulder, she is turned toward him, with the top of her precious head resting against the side of his face. She can't walk or sit up straight, and offers only an occasional groan. She's just sitting there unresponsive, seemingly oblivious, as Dad dutifully reads her a story, altering his voice to impersonate the different characters.

My mind began wandering, imagining this father's world. On bended knee is a man who must walk through life brokenhearted for his daughter, who will never sing silly songs, skate in the park, or dance at her prom. A dad who loves his little girl perhaps even more because of that but who will never hear "I love you, Daddy," whispered in his ear or receive a homemade Father's Day card with sunshine and stick people. She will never do most of the things a pony-tailed little girl wants to do for her daddy. A tidal wave of sorrow crashed over me as I pictured my Jessica strapped in and slumped over in that wheelchair. The lens of my soul zoomed in on her facial expression as she sits wrapped in her father's arms. Earnestly reading, she sits spellbound, gazing into his face with her mouth slightly open with a smile. He's glued to the book; she's glued to him. What does she see? What does she feel? She seems so content and peaceful, at home really, resting her head against Daddy's face, receiving his love. Then again, that's all she can do. She's not even capable of reciprocating her father's love, and yet I can see she is his most precious treasure. Perhaps most look upon this scene in pity. How terrible to not be able to function in the most essential ways; perhaps in the eyes of the world she is useless. Not to her father. To him she is priceless.

Taking all this in, a torrent of troubling thoughts rose from somewhere deep within me. Would God still love me if I couldn't do anything for him? What if I were

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useless and couldn't do even the basic things I had learned a good Christian does? What if I couldn't impact others in any significant way, lead someone to Christ, serve a person in need, teach others Scripture, be a leader? What if I couldn't even go to church or have a quiet time? What if I couldn't progress any further in my spiritual life? What if I were barely even capable of having an intelligent thought about God? What if . . .

What if I'm the girl slumped over in the wheelchair? What if there isn't anything I can do "for" God? What if he just wants me to lean against his face and receive his love? What if this phantom Christian I've been chasing is just a big distraction from resting in what God wants to

freely give? What if my value and worth to God are not contingent on what I do? Maybe this is why I'm so tired inside. My soul has only so much energy, and the bulk of mine is being drained through striving to earn God's love and acceptance. What would it be like to truly know there isn't one more thing I ever have to do for God in order for him to be pleased with me?

I am so afraid. I'm holding on to all these things I feel I must do to stay on God's radar. Who will I be if I have nothing left to hold on to? Who will I be when I stand before God with empty hands? Maybe this is what God is trying to tell me. He wants me to open my clenched fists and discover I am not what I do but what he wants to give me. And what he wants to give me is love and life, unconditional love and life.

God placed the little girl right before me and gave me the eyes to see the deeper meaning of her handicapped condition. Until I understand I literally cannot *do* anything *for* God to achieve worth and value in his eyes, I won't stop trying. Maybe God wants me to stop trying. Though I had a seminary degree and could wax eloquent from the Pauline Epistles about "unmerited favor," somehow God could see I needed a little help to truly understand. He arranged for that angel in a wheelchair to be right in place, knowing I needed to witness a dad loving his daughter who couldn't do anything for him and didn't need to. Watching her peacefully and contentedly resting against Daddy's face, I could see she had found what my soul was yearning for. I needed to know a heavenly Father's love that did not require my striving to maintain it. Maybe you can't get the "know he is God" part right until you get the "be still" part down.

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The aroma of baking bread has permeated this sacred space today. It is a reminder to us that it is in the breaking of bread, the resurrected Jesus was recognized. The communion table is the place where we learn how to eat at every table.

At Jesus' table, there is a balance between abundance and need. Those who have means share what they have, so that all are invited and no one goes hungry. At Jesus' table, the walls between people come down. Christ is found in our companions, the ones we eat bread with, and the dinner table is the Lord's everyday cathedral. It is in the saying of table blessings and the breaking of bread with one another that a meal with Jesus is celebrated, and his resurrected presence is experienced.

Experience the embrace of God's radical love for us all. Let your life be healed in the breaking of bread on this day.