

Third Sunday of Easter – Year A

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” “Were not our hearts burning within us?”

Last Sunday we heard John’s account of Easter evening – Jesus appearing to the disciples huddled in the locked room. Today, we have Luke’s version of what happened on the evening of Easter. And as John is the only Gospel that talks about Thomas wanting to see the wounds of Jesus, Luke is the only Gospel that mentions this story of what happens on the road to Emmaus.

This is an iconic story - because we all live it. The last time I preached on this Gospel was when Harry chose it for Fr. Wayne’s funeral. “We had hoped...” This story is *iconic* because it speaks to us, it is *relevant*, to so much of the experience of our lives. And here in this pandemic, we are living it again. The two disciples – when asked by the stranger why they are so downcast – begin by telling the facts, like a news report, of the arrest and death of Jesus – like our news relating the numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths that appear on the screen constantly. And the facts are terrible. Jesus, an innocent man, was tortured and crucified then. Now, thousands of people around the world have died, the world economy is a mess, we are sequestered in our homes.

But then these disciples reveal what is at the heart of their sorrow, their being near despair – when they say, “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” “But we had hoped...” “But we thought he was going to save us all.” And with them, we, too, say, “But we had hoped we were immune to this kind of thing.” “But we thought we were safe in the US.” – “We thought that our retirement was secure with our 401(k) investments.” “We thought this virus would have passed by now.” “We had hoped it was just like the flu...”

It is not the *events* that make us sad, perhaps – not the events themselves that lead us to the edge of despair – but our *unmet expectations, our dashed hopes*. “But we had hoped that he was the one...” Many of us had hoped to celebrate Easter in church – with the choir and organ making beautiful music, or to spend Spring break on a nice vacation. More seriously, I had hoped that our response to the suffering all around us would be to find ways to help – to sacrifice our own wants for someone else’s needs...

We are told that after the two disciples have had the chance to tell the story of their disappointment, their dashed hopes, their distress - the Stranger then proceeds to say, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” In other words, “You’ve got it all wrong. You’re looking at this the wrong way.” “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

But their eyes still weren’t opened. And very likely, I think they might have been a little put off. They were expressing their feelings to this Stranger, and he responds with biblical exegesis! And as far as this Gospel passage tells us, nothing has changed for the two disciples up to this point.

We’ve all been here, too. We all have feelings about the “stay at home” policies, about being told where we can and cannot go, about how many deaths are acceptable to save the economy. And others who feel differently may offer evidence of all kinds to sway us – some more factual than others – but arguing “facts” does not seem very helpful. It takes more than facts to change our feelings. Our heads are not really very well-connected to our hearts.

And so the two disciples, after hearing about the experience of the women at the tomb before they left Jerusalem and after being given, from this Stranger on the road, an explanation of the scriptures that would be the envy of everyone in the bible study group, these two disciples are still – looking sad. They don’t recognize the Stranger. He doesn’t meet their expectations. He is not what or who they are looking for.

It's not until they arrive home and open themselves, inviting this Stranger into their home, that change begins. "Stay with us...it is nearly evening." They have gone from "hearing about" from others to "learning about" through the Scriptures – to sharing their home and heart with this Stranger, *trusting* the Stranger. That's what inviting someone for dinner is about – establishing and celebrating communion born of trust. And in that breaking of the bread, they are changed. Then they recognize for themselves that Jesus is alive. They know for themselves – not because of what others have told them, and not because of what was in the Scriptures they had read – but because they have experienced for themselves.

And the moment passes. "And he vanished from their sight." – but they still *knew*. "Were not our hearts burning within us?" They knew in their hearts. And they trusted their experience.

I think we often look at this gospel and ask ourselves what we have to do to have our hearts burn within us. How can we have an experience of God that will move us in this way?

This is Luke's gospel, friends. The gospel of things reversed. So, I think we have to reverse this also. Instead of asking how we can have such an experience of God, we need to ask ourselves, "When was my heart burning within me?" "Where has my heart been moved?" - We must ask *those* questions, and then recognize that those are the moments when the Risen One has entered into the locked rooms of our hearts. Those are the moments when the Risen Christ has been accompanying us on our journey.

The facts and figures may not move us beyond despair. But seeing the faces, hearing the voices of those who are holding the hands of those who are dying because there is nothing else they can do... Hearing about the people of New York City going outside every night at 7 o'clock to clap their hands and honk their horns in appreciation for the first responders and medical teams and all those "essential workers"...

Seeing folks celebrating when someone is able to stand with a walker and leave the hospital after recovering... remembering those we have so deeply loved who are now beyond our sight... these things *move our souls*. These times *can make our hearts burn within us*. When your heart is moved, at the sight of a sunrise or a night sky full of stars, at the sound of singing or the fall of tears, the Risen Christ is present. And when your heart, so moved, leads you to be the Stranger walking alongside someone else who is near despair, when you are moved to get someone what they need even if it means sacrificing what you want, the Risen Christ is present there, too, through you.

Last Sunday, John's Gospel invited us to recognize the Risen One by his wounds, and our own... Today, Luke asks us to recognize Jesus, the Stranger, present with us in our disappointment and grief and despair, and present in those walking the road with us now. In these days when we cannot celebrate the literal breaking of the bread together, let us not fail to recognize Christ present - whenever and wherever our hearts are burning within us. And let us not fail to remember that we are to *be* Christ present for one another.

Amen.

Year A
RCL

- [Acts 2:14a,36-41](#)
- [1 Peter 1:17-23](#)
- [Luke 24:13-35](#)
- [Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17](#)