

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
May 4, 2014, 3Easter

Sermon by Rev. Gloria G. Hopewell, D.Min.
"Burning Hearts, Opened Eyes"
Text--Luke 24:13-35

I am a window seat person. Whenever I travel by air, I try to reserve a seat next to the window because I have never outgrown my fascination with gazing out at the world below and letting my mind and imagination wander. From 30,000 feet, much of the earth looks tidy—cities and towns with their grids of roadways, a patchwork quilt of irrigated farmland fields and ribbons of country roads winding through the woodlands or spiraling around a hilltop. But I particularly enjoy the contrast between that neat work of human hands and the wilder beauty of God's own creation—rivers that have run amok through the careful designs, or scraggly coast lines that surprise and give some relief from the orderliness of these patterns.

From such a vantage point, we do not, of course, see the whole picture. A mountain range that appears like a sheet of crumpled cellophane tossed across the landscape does not begin to reflect the power of the mountains that we observe when we look upward from the foothills or when we are poised at the top of a ski slope. An overflowing river that looks as if its bank has been erased by some giant thumb does not bespeak the tragedy and destruction of a flood. The aerial view of houses and apartment buildings lined up along streets or curved around cul de sacs does not reveal either the desolation of tenements or the luxury of brownstones. What we see is real enough—but the dimensions are limited. What we see—and what we perceive—depends on our angle of vision.

It is not surprising that those two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus in the stranger. On the road together for maybe two hours or so—we don't really know the location of Emmaus except that it went from Jerusalem toward the sea—they are disappointed and confused—heartbroken, in fact—by what has happened to Jesus. Not knowing what else to do, they head back home to pick up the threads of their lives. So caught up were they in going over and over the events, so turned inward in their despair, their "angle of vision" did not include the expectation of meeting Jesus there, or anywhere, for that matter.

As they trudge toward home and are joined by the unrecognized stranger, when they tell him this tragic story, every bit of their despair comes through in three words, “We had hoped....” We had hoped—he was the one. We had hoped—he one who would free us from these Romans. We had hoped—he was the Messiah. But now....

We know what it’s like when hope is dashed, don’t we? We had hoped that this medicine, this treatment would take away the pain, cure the disease. We had hoped that this job would come through, that our marriage would survive, that life would be okay again, the sun would shine. But, instead, we stare into the yawning hole of hope snatched away.

It was not only these two, of course. It is similar with the others in six more Gospel stories, called the “post-resurrection narratives,” where Jesus appeared to followers in various places and different circumstances after his death and burial. To Mary in the garden near the tomb. To those hiding in an upper room. In Galilee along the shore of the sea. For all who loved Jesus, things were way out of kilter—not at all what they expected. Nothing made sense. Even. To. These. Friends. who were used to Jesus turning things on their heads! They surely did not expect him to die. Or be resurrected! In every one of these stories, there are those moments before Jesus was recognized. And different, very human ways in which the recognition began to dawn. A voice, a word, an action.

There are scholars who have suggested that the second disciple, the companion of Cleopas on the journey to Emmaus, was a woman, perhaps his wife. The Cleopas of Luke’s gospel might have been the one called Clopas in the gospel of John whose wife was the “other” Mary present at the cross. Well, you know me! I like this idea—it sets imaginations to work filling in the details that are not in the written stories.

Imagine this, for example. Someone had to prepare the food for Jesus’ Passover celebration. Someone had to make and bake the unleavened bread. It might have been the women who surrounded Jesus and the disciples in these times who did these tasks. And though they may not have been present at table with the men and participated in this Last Supper, perhaps one or more hung in the background, in a corner of the room—to make certain that the men had the food and wine they needed. And perhaps this “other” Mary, wife of Clopas, watched as Jesus broke that unleavened bread. Perhaps she saw his hands, his gestures,

the way he took that bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the others. And perhaps in her humble Emmaus home, she saw those hands and gestures again and the whole scene came flooding back in her memory. It could have happened that way.

Has that ever happened to you? A fragment of a memory—a wisp of song, a fragrance, the sound of a voice—and suddenly a scene or event washes over you, enveloping you—not just your mind, but all of your senses, even your body. The moment is filled with significance, a deepening of meaning. It is not rational or logical but profoundly powerful.

Fred Craddock tells us that there are three times in which to know an event. There is the rehearsal (or anticipation) phase, the event itself, and the memory of the event. The first phase is hindered by our not really knowing what is going to happen, if it is going to happen, and how important it will be to us. The event itself is hindered by the confusion and busyness of the moment. It is only in the remembrance that those obstacles are cleared away and we are able to fully comprehend its meaning.

Look what happened with Cleopas and his companion, his wife. Jesus had suddenly vanished after they recognized him in the breaking of the bread. They remembered just a little while before when they were still walking with him on the path and said, “Were not our hearts burning....?” Up until then, it had been just an ordinary walk, an ordinary stranger. They had ignored the sensation or hadn’t really noticed it before. But now, their hearts burned so hot that they leapt up from the table to go all the way back to Jerusalem—another two hours late in the evening (or maybe less than two hours, because I’ll bet they walked back with a spring in their step!)

They were compelled to go back to that upper room where the others were gathered to tell all that had happened to them. Their story was added to the others—the appearance to Simon Peter. Even Mary Magdalene’s story was finally affirmed. And then they all began to remember, telling the stories over and over. The times with Jesus before his death and the experiences of his presence afterwards.

We do this kind of remembering and story telling, too, don’t we? After some traumatic event, whether it is a death in our own family, a crisis in the community, or a national disaster. We talk about it and tell our stories. And

sometimes, it is in remembering and telling the stories that we begin to understand meaning and significance that we didn't see before.

For the disciples, after the stories had been told and retold, again and again, they knew what they had to do. They could not just remain in the remembering. They had to leave behind the upper rooms, the fishing boats, and the hometowns where they had retreated in confusion. They had to tell the stories to others, far and wide. Because through these experiences and stories, they were changed. And they had to continue what Jesus showed them they must do—to carry his vision of God's realm to all the ends of the earth, in word and in deed.

Each of us, in our brokenness, walks the Emmaus road, the road of despair and deep disappointment. The road that Frederick Buechner says is “the place we go in order to escape—a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, ‘let the whole [damned] thing be hanged. It makes no difference, anyway.’” The one that Barbara Brown Taylor calls “the road you walk when your team has lost, your candidate has been defeated, your loved one has died—the long road back to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again.”

It is the road we walk when what we had hoped for crumbles in our hand. Taylor says that “hope in the past tense is one of the saddest sounds a human being can make.” But somewhere, sometime, in an everyday ordinary place or event, we experience the presence of the living Christ, the hope is rekindled, and we recognize that our hearts are burning. And then we, too, must get back on that road once more.

For you see, Easter did not end two Sunday nights ago. Easter is the rest of our lives. It has to be because otherwise, what's the point? The question we must ask ourselves is, what are we, as the body of Christ, meant to be and to do? How can we change the angle of our own vision? What if we really expected to encounter Christ every Sunday morning in church? What if we expected to encounter Christ every day, in line at the grocery store, in the midst of a challenging meeting at work, on the golf course or tennis court? What if we could break through our veneer of sophistication, our busyness and preoccupation, and quit discussing and debating the *idea* of God and recognize that to experience the presence of God, we must follow the burning of our hearts. What kind of difference might that make in our own lives and that of the church?

My friends, the Emmaus story opens us to encountering Christ at the table right here and now. What Cleopas and his companion or wife saw there—those hands that performed that simple act of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving that common loaf of bread—we see here in the sharing of the bread and wine. The Emmaus story happens again and again. Whenever we break the bread together and share the cup— whether at this altar each Sunday, in fellowship in the Parish House or at our own kitchen tables, or at the tables of the Hunger Luncheon, may we remember the stories of Jesus and the disciples. And may it be more than a memorial. May we also know the presence of the Living Christ in our midst. May our hearts burn and our eyes be open to the One who was, who is, and forever shall be. For Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

Amen.