

May 8, 2011 / Eastertide / David L. Edwards

### **Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Emmaus**

Luke 24:13-35

Luke gives us this beautiful story of two disciples on their way to Emmaus, a village nearby Jerusalem, on the afternoon of the resurrection. I dearly love this story. It is told with such elegant simplicity, its texture arousing rich spiritual insight. It is very visual. There are three scenes--the conversation on the road, the disciples and Jesus in the house, and the disciples sharing the news with the others back in Jerusalem. I can see them as a triptych painted by Rembrandt, whose palette would serve this story well.

We don't know why they are on this journey. We are given the name of one of the disciples, Cleopas, but we don't know anything about him. The other is unnamed. These details of the story, I think, help put us in the story. We are disciples, on the road, the journey. The two are discussing the events of the past days. Jesus trial and death. Trying to make sense of it, to figure out what it all means and where it leaves them. There is a kind of aimlessness in their journey, tinged with grief or confusion or not knowing what to do next. I think we find ourselves in that same spiritual state at times on this journey of faith.

Jesus joins them on the road, but they don't recognize him. He asks what they are talking about. They are amazed. Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know what went down?! The scene is full of irony, even humor. They are telling Jesus what has happened to Jesus! Jesus just plays along, asking them what they mean. Here is a wonderful example of how the gospel writers both proclaim and conceal or protect the mystery of the resurrection. They don't try to prove anything. They don't attempt to overwhelm the reader with evidence. Jesus' presence is quite real following the resurrection, but it is ambiguous, hard to pin down. He eats fish (Matt. 24:41-43), but he also appears in rooms without using the door (24:36ff). In this case, he is with his disciples, but in a way that they don't recognize him.

Why don't they recognize him? We are not sure. Maybe their disappointment and despondency clouds their vision. They stand there in the middle of the road looking sad, telling this stranger about Jesus' being a prophet and all, and yet he was crucified. There are rumors about his being alive in some kind of way, but, you know, that's what WOMEN are saying! And then they pour their hearts out to this stranger. We really had hoped he was the messiah from God, the one who would bring in God's reign.

So maybe their disappointment keeps them from seeing Jesus. And their disappointment has to do with the expectations they had of Jesus. Here is something for us to work with, how our expectations of things and people inevitably lead us to disappointment and anger and despondency, thus spiritual deadness and unnecessary unhappiness. We know from other gospel stories that the disciples were forever misunderstanding what Jesus was about. They wanted to make him into a revolutionary or a political leader who would throw off the yoke of Rome. The kingdom of God he talked so much about to them was a regime change, throwing out the bums and putting THEM in charge. They had loved his miracles and surely thought he would just keep pulling off one after another, dazzling everyone and fixing every problem, as though it was all about having miraculous powers. But none of that happened. Instead, he got himself killed. There is just something not right, even embarrassing, about following a spiritual leader who comes off as weak by the world's standards, who suffers, who lets himself be ridiculed and finally killed. He did not even defend himself!

We get ideas in our heads about who God is or Jesus is, or ought to be. And we get attached to those ideas so much that we can't see Jesus right beside us! The Buddhists have a saying: If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him! That's pretty strong! The idea is that when we get attached to ideas about the Buddha, or in our case about God or Jesus, we are not open to the reality of God or Jesus. We have stopped seeing, stopped understanding, stopped getting insight. We've reduced Jesus to a theological or spiritual or political program, and we are no longer open to how Jesus reveals his presence day to day. If Christians would stop being so cocksure they know who Jesus is, maybe they would be able to SEE Jesus and really follow him. Not the Jesus we make up to fit our cultural values, but the Jesus to whom scripture points us. How many self-proclaimed Christians do you think were in the streets shouting "USA! USA!" after the killing of Osama Bin Laden? We love revenge, can even quote the Bible on it. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Jesus said that, too: You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,'...but I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer, and if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile (Matt. 5:38-42) We love to quote the Bible to wield our truth like a weapon and justify violence, physical or spiritual. But we avoid those things that are at the heart of Jesus' teachings and life! In many ways, our patterns of thinking and our emotional states hide from us the presence of Jesus. It is important to always be open to knowing Jesus' presence and reality outside of our ideas about Jesus. That is a part of our inward journey work, becoming aware of the attachments, the concepts, the emotional states we cling to that keep us from awareness of Jesus' presence and

teaching and leading. It is important to cultivate "not knowing" so that we can be open to God, to Jesus.

It is nightfall now. The disciples invite the stranger into the place where they are staying, an inn or the home of some friend. While he is there with them, they share a meal. He takes bread and breaks it, and...okay, something is happening, something strangely familiar. They've seen this before. They've heard these words before. As they share the bread, "their eyes are opened and they know that it is Jesus". As soon as they glimpse his presence with them, he vanishes from sight.

Suddenly everything changes. We KNEW it was him! The way he opened up the scriptures for us made our hearts come alive. And the breaking of bread with us. They rush back to the city to tell the eleven disciples, the inner circle, so to speak (Judas is no longer with them). The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon! Luke feels the need to insert the importance of Peter, who became the leader of the community after Jesus' death and resurrection. And they report everything that happened to them on the road that day, and how he became known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The first part of the story tells us that the living Christ is with us, even when we do not recognize him. His presence with us is hidden when we cling to our own fixed ways of thinking and the emotions that sweep over us at times, the hurts, disappointments, despondency, and so forth. Here it is, after Easter, and the world continues to be a mess. We had hoped it would be different, that Jesus would fix everything, that the disastrous road we are on as a human family would come to an end. Our hearts and minds become clouded with disappointment or fear or despondency. In many ways, we stop paying attention to what is happening right now, right here, in this moment, in this place, where Jesus is with us in a hidden way.

Did not our hearts burn within us as he explained scripture and its meaning? This is the importance of scripture, for those of Jesus' time, of course, the Hebrew scriptures. For us today, also our Christian scriptures. One of the disciplines to which we commit ourselves in membership is the daily reading and study of scripture. This is hard for some of us. The task can seem overwhelming. There is so much of it, and sometimes it just does not make sense or speak to us. We also become skittish about scripture because we see it so misused. We see it turned into a weapon to control, hurt, or condemn others. All of this says that, yes, it is a challenge to keep working daily with scripture, but these are not really reasons to abandon our work. It is through our reading and study of scripture that our hearts are warmed to God and to Jesus and to the truth of our lives as human beings living as part of God's creation. Scripture is not an end in itself. It points us to God, to the nature and ways of the life of faith. And just like the scene on the road to

Emmaus, there are times when scripture just does not seem to speak to us, but then at moments it becomes clear. Our faithful work with scripture grounds us in the journey of understanding and wisdom. We grow in our ability to listen to and read scripture with open hearts ready to be warmed as we let scripture help us touch our own lives in relationship to God, to Jesus, to the world as God's creation.

They recognized him as he broke bread with them. We celebrate the Eucharist once a month. I come from a tradition, the Disciples of Christ, that shares what we call the Lord's Supper, or simply Communion, every Sunday when the community gathers. There are many practices and traditions about what scriptures call simply "the breaking of bread". Some are highly elaborate, making the rite so complex and mysterious that only certain people can administer it and only those of one's own tradition can partake. Sometimes Christians of all stripes go through Communion as a mindless habit, no matter how often they partake. I find myself ambivalent these days about Communion. I have felt that it so important that our once-a-month observance feels to me like spiritual malnutrition. And yet, I do not feel it should be an impediment to those who find it somehow a stumbling block.

I come back to this story and realize, however, that the essential thing about the breaking of bread together is that it is a means of reminding us who we are, of waking us up. It can awaken us to the presence of Jesus with us. It is not the elements themselves and by themselves that matter, as though they had some magical nature. It is what we DO together that jogs our spiritual memory, that wakes us up to our lives as Jesus' followers and as his community. We break the bread, and we share it with one another. We receive the cup and serve one another. And in all of this--the words spoken, the bread, the cup, the sharing--we see Jesus. We glimpse him and our lives in him as his community.

Then he vanishes. Sometimes we are able to recognize Jesus, to see him in our midst. Sometimes we don't. That is the way it is with the journey of the life of faith. The presence of the living Christ is a reality we touch in moments when our minds and hearts become open, free of our fears, free of our anxiousness, empty of the attachments that keep us from really being present, really being open. It is a presence, a reality we glimpse as we continue on the journey of faith. The life of faith is not a triumphal march from victory unto victory, as an old hymn says. It is a way of life that often involves NOT knowing, NOT being sure where we are going, NOT always sensing the presence and leading of Jesus. Yet that journey is helped along the way by our faithful reading of and work with scripture, by ourselves and together, and by the breaking of bread as we gather as Jesus' community.

One last thing. There in that unidentified house in the outlying village of Emmaus, Jesus

shared a meal with two of his disciples. He broke bread with the very disciples who had abandoned him at the time of his arrest, suffering, and death. Think about it! There is not a hint of reproach or "I told you so, but you didn't believe me" or anything else. He sits down with them and breaks bread. The meal that we call the Eucharist, that we celebrate from this table, is a sign of the whole of our life as Jesus' community. It is the sign of a love, a life that is gracious and welcoming, full of forgiveness and the continual discovery of the gift of being together as children of God. Regardless of what has happened between us or among us, regardless of who it is that comes into our community, we sit down together in the spirit of welcome, of peace, of the all-embracing and ever-accepting love of God which we know in Jesus.