

May 4, 2014 / Eastertide / David L. Edwards

The Presence of the Living Jesus

Luke 24:13-35

They 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 scriptures to us?"

Luke offers a beautiful story of two disciples on their way to a village near Jerusalem, in the afternoon of the resurrection. We don't know why they are on this journey. We are given the name of only one of them, Cleopas, and nothing is known about him. This lack of detail, I think, invites us into the story. We are disciples, on the road, the journey, in the afterglow of the resurrection. The two are discussing the events of the past days, what it all means and where it leaves them. I sense a kind of aimlessness in their journey, caused perhaps by grief, confusion, and simply not knowing what to do next. I think we experience these same things as we live our lives as a journey of faith.

Jesus joins them on the road, but they don't recognize him. He asks what they are talking about, and they are amazed that he doesn't know what happened. The scene is full of irony, even humor. They are telling Jesus what happened to Jesus! Jesus plays along, asking the disciples what they mean. Here is a vivid example of how the gospel writers both proclaim and conceal the mystery of the resurrection. They don't try to prove anything. Jesus' resurrected presence is real, but ambiguous, hard to pin down. Why don't they recognize him? We cannot be sure. Maybe their disappointment and despondency clouds their awareness. They stand in the middle of the road looking sad, telling this stranger about Jesus' being a prophet, 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! Remember that the gospels agree that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Here is shown a typical male response!

Then it pours out of them: We had hoped he was the messiah who would establish God's reign. So, it seems that their disappointment, their heartbreak, keeps them from seeing Jesus. What they had expected of Jesus did not happen. Here is something very important for us in our inward journey work, how our expectations of events and people inevitably lead to disappointment, disillusionment, even anger, and thus spiritual deadness and unhappiness. We know from other gospel stories that the disciples consistently misunderstood what Jesus was about. They wanted to make him into a revolutionary, a political leader, a miracle worker, or a divine being who would fix

every problem. None of that happened. Instead, he got himself killed. There is something awkward, if not embarrassing, about following a spiritual leader who looks weak by the world's standards and rejects most of what society, and religion, values and admires, who suffers, 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. We get so attached to those ideas so that they blind us to reality. Zen Buddhism has a saying: If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him! The point is that when we get attached to ideas about the Buddha, or in our case about God or Jesus, we are no longer open to the reality of God or Jesus. We have stopped seeing, stopped understanding, stopped getting insight. We have reduced Jesus to a theological or spiritual or political program, and are no longer open to how Jesus reveals his presence day to day. If Christians would stop being so cock-sure they know who Jesus is, maybe they would be able to SEE Jesus and really follow him, really live the life to which he calls them. Not the Jesus we make up to fit our cultural values, but the Jesus to whom scripture points us. A significant part of our inward journey work is 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. The spiritual life includes the cultivation of this kind of "not knowing" so that we remain open to the reality of God, of Jesus.

It is now twilight. The disciples invite the stranger into the place where they are staying. They share a meal together. Jesus takes bread and breaks it, and...okay, something is happening, something strangely familiar. They've seen this before, 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 opened the eyes of our hearts. They rush back to the city to tell the other disciples. They report everything that happened to them on the road that day, and how, in the breaking of bread, they knew that he was still with them.

This story skilfully tells of Jesus continuing presence with us, even when we do not recognize him. His presence is hidden when we cling to our 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 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—his teachings, his spirit, his wisdom, his love, and his call to follow him, to be his community.

We become aware of Jesus' presence as we listen to and work with scripture. 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, turned into a weapon to control, hurt, or condemn others. All of this says that it is a challenge to keep working daily with scripture, but these are not really reasons to abandon our work. Scripture is not an end in itself. It points us to God, to the nature and ways of the life of faith. Just as in the story, there are times when scripture does not seem to speak to us, but then there are moments of insight, of understanding. 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 scripture helps us touch our own lives in relationship to God, to Jesus, to the world as God's creation. In this vein, I remind you of and invite you to participate in our Wednesday morning worship and study of the weekly lectionary readings. Make this a part of your discipline of scripture study and you will experience scripture as a more vital part of your life and faith.

We become aware of Jesus' presence as we worship together and celebrate the Eucharist. The disciples recognized Jesus as he broke bread with them. We celebrate the Eucharist once a month. I come from a tradition, the Disciples of Christ, that believes that unless the Lord's Supper, as we call it, is shared, it is simply not worship. I have been amazed through the years to witness how important communion is to people. Just try doing without it one Sunday in a Disciples' congregation! In this simple meal, the presence of the risen Jesus is known to us—in the bread, the cup, the words, the serving, the sharing. For me, the Eucharist is really more the center of worship than the sermon. The sermon, as talking about Jesus, evokes a certain awareness of Jesus' presence. Yet in the sharing of the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, we experience more vividly his presence in us and among us as his community.

The disciples recognize Jesus' presence, then he vanishes. Sometimes we recognize Jesus, are aware of his spirit in our midst. Sometimes not. That is the way it is with the journey of the life of faith. The presence of the living Jesus 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 includes NOT knowing, NOT being sure where we are going, NOT always sensing the presence and leading of Jesus. Yet that journey is sustained by our faithful reading of and work with scripture, on our own and together, and by our worship and the breaking of bread as we gather as Jesus' community. And by our faithfulness in doing the things to which we feel Jesus has called us to serve the life of God's world.

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 struggled so to understand what he was about, who 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, or the Lord's Supper, or simply Communion, 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 to us or among us, regardless of the condition of the world around us, 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. And the grace of this meal renews us as a community of faith and of service, a channel of God's love for the world.