

Sermon: Looking for Jesus The Second Sunday of Easter April 8, 2018

That same day two of the disciples were walking to the village Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem. They were deep in conversation, going over all these things that had happened. In the middle of their talk and questions, Jesus came up and walked along with them. But they were not able to recognize who He was.

He asked, "What's this you're discussing so intently as you walk along?" They just stood there, long-faced, like they had lost their best friend. Then one of them, his name was Cleopas, said, "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened during the last few days?"

Jesus said, "What has happened?" They said, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene. He was a man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God and all the people. Then our high priests and leaders betrayed Him, got Him sentenced to death, and crucified Him. And we had our hopes up that He was the One, the One about to deliver Israel. And it is now the third day since it happened. But now some of our women have completely confused us. Early this morning they were at the tomb and couldn't find His body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn't see Jesus."

Then Jesus said to them, "So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don't you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into His glory?" Then He started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to Him.

They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. Jesus acted as if he were going on but they pressed Him: "Stay and have supper with us. It's nearly evening; the day is done." So He went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, He blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized Him! And then He disappeared.

Back and forth they talked. "Didn't we feel on fire as He conversed with us on the road, as He opened up the Scriptures for us?" Luke 24: 13-32

This is one of my favorite scriptures about Jesus as the Risen Christ. I love it because it's a story about us, about us followers of Jesus who - just like Cleopas and some of Jesus' other disciples - we are sometimes disappointed that Jesus isn't who we hoped He'd be. Like Cleopas and others, we don't always recognize Christ when He walks with us. The Walk to Emmaus is our story: of following Jesus; of disappointment

and disillusionment that He has not overcome our enemies; and of grief that life is a great heartbreaking mess sometimes. This is our story, and it's an invitation to practice looking for Jesus, and to share with others where we see Him.

I want to share how I saw Jesus on Holy Thursday. Holy Week is the most sacred week of the Christian year, when we walk with Jesus, and wait with Him, and grieve with Him. This year on Holy Thursday the Worship Team and the Choir created a meaningful evening of dramatic readings from Jesus' closest friends. Every table in Fellowship Hall was beautifully set, and there was food and candlelight and Adrian Borcea's beautiful accompaniment. Francesca Hernandez was Mary, Jesus' dear friend, who spent an extravagant amount of money on perfume to anoint the Lord's feet. Mary's love for Jesus shone out of Francesca. Teri Logan was Jesus' mother, Mary, who gave a heartrending testimony about her own anguish, and about the suffering of every mother who loses a child. After Mary's witness, Don Keeble sang, "*Where you there when the sun refused to shine?*" William Martin was Simon Peter, who shared his confusion about Jesus' washing his feet, like a servant, and Simon Peter's slow understanding that to follow Jesus is to be a servant. We washed each other's hands around the tables. Mark Logan was Judas, who told us of his frustration with Jesus - and of his anger and disappointment that Jesus was not the dragon-slaying messiah the Israelites had hoped for. Judas shared with us his disgust and then his shame at realizing that Jesus invited all kinds of people to His table... even outcasts and sinners and losers. Even Judas himself. And we shared Holy Communion around our tables. Chris Martin was the Roman soldier who watched Jesus die on the cross - and in the watching he recognized Jesus as the Messiah - and he was shaken and converted by

the experience. Laurel Hill was Salome, who stayed close to the other women to support them, to be a soul-friend, to give Jesus this last gift of her compassion and care. Bunny Gruhn directed the Choir, singing Mozart's hauntingly beautiful *Ave Verum*. Jeff Deiss read the scriptures, and Katie Hodges led us through the evening as the narrator. I was no longer in Fellowship Hall ~ I was with Jesus' followers, and I was hearing their story, and seeing Him through their eyes. The fake trees and the linoleum floor of Fellowship Hall was blurry through my tears, and I saw Jesus in the faces of His friends. The turnout on Holy Thursday was disappointing. The Worship Team and the Choir prepared an amazing and sacred experience for us. It hit me when Don Keeble sang, "*Were You There?*" that not many of us were. Showing up is one of the ways we share the story of our faith, one of the ways we are the Body of Christ.

Yesterday there was a memorial service here. The church is a place for sacred events. Not so much weddings anymore, but funerals and memorial services are still here in this place, because we are all (and you can call it whatever you like) but we are all walking the road to Emmaus, looking for Jesus. We are all looking for sacredness, because so much of life looks and feels profane. Grieving families always express their amazed gratitude for our hospitality, and yesterday was no different. David White was down here early, making sure the technology worked for showing slides, and Kathleen Flemming played heavenly piano music, and Nancy Flood and Sande Hubbs and Mary Henderson and Judy Stillman and Carol Lu Zischke and Paul and Sue Renno hosted a beautiful reception. We were, this small group of us, the Body of Christ, and if He wasn't seen by any eyes, Jesus was certainly felt and experienced in these acts of hospitality.

One of my Catholic friends recently asked me, since Pope Francis has said there's no hell, did I think church attendance would drop off? I said that Methodists don't use the fear of hell to require attendance, so I didn't think Pope Francis' statement would influence us much... but I do wonder... what does encourage us to show up? The walk on the road to Emmaus where the disciples, whom biblical scholars think were a husband and wife, Cleopas and Mary, happened right after the crucifixion. Luke (the only gospel writer who records this event) tells us what the disciples said to the stranger on the road. They were talking about Jesus (with Jesus.) "He was a man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God and all the people. Then our high priests and leaders betrayed Him, got Him sentenced to death, and crucified Him. And we had our hopes up that He was the One, the One about to deliver Israel. And it is now the third day since it happened. But now some of our women have completely confused us."

It was the third day after the crucifixion when these two disciples met the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. I wonder if after 2000 years we are tired of looking for Him, or our eyesight has grown dim, or our expectations have faded away, or if, like some of the first disciples, we just don't believe the accounts of people who saw the Risen Christ. Grief and disappointment can either numb us to His presence or reveal Him to us. Some of us now worship without our children and grandchildren, which is its own kind of grief and disappointment. Maybe then we're afraid to tell others about seeing and hearing and experiencing the Risen Christ because... it hasn't influenced our own families. I don't need to outline every possible reason we don't recognize Jesus in our midst, or every reason we don't look for Him. But what I do need to do is to

encourage you and expect us to look for Jesus - to look for Jesus as a spiritual practice - and to talk with other people about how and where we see Him. If we're not practicing looking for Jesus in the world, and in us, and in other people; seeing for Jesus in service and sacrifice, in love and mercy and compassion; seeking Jesus in acts of justice and peace; recognizing Him in brokenness and sorrow and joy and wonder... if we're not actively searching for Jesus, then what are we doing that's bringing about His kingdom, that's revealing Him to others? If we're not continually walking the road to Emmaus, looking for Jesus and telling others about where we see Him and where we miss Him ~ how are we practicing our faith? How are we keeping the stories of our faith alive? Cleopas and his companion told the story about recognizing the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. We still tell their story. And you need to tell your story and I need to tell mine, about where we see and recognize the Lord.

I mentioned yesterday's memorial service because grief and loss are part of today's gospel lesson... and part of our human life. Cleopas and his companion were heartsick and disappointed and probably angry that all their hopes were killed with Jesus. The stranger who walked with them on the road to Emmaus encouraged them to tell Him about their recent experiences, and then He taught them what the scriptures revealed about Himself. Some translations say that Jesus opened the scriptures, or interpreted the scriptures, to them. Jesus explained the mystery of the cross to them. Part of the mystery Jesus explained to them is that God understands unbearable suffering, that God shares our suffering, and that God is with us in our suffering. Jesus understands our human life because He's fully lived it.

Grief can be a place we can meet people, and offer them hospitality, and help them see Jesus. It does seem kind of odd to think that suffering with others might be a place we can most authentically be the church. But when you walk with someone who's suffering, you walk the road to Emmaus with them, helping them look for and recognize Jesus. When you take time to be with someone who's suffering, you're offering them hospitality, and welcome, and solidarity, and compassion, all of which Jesus offers to you. Not everyone who comes here knows or calls Jesus by name, but all of us are looking for Him. We are looking to see the face of God's love (Jesus) in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. We are looking for our place at the Table where we are welcomed, where we belong, where we are known and loved. Jesus is often revealed and experienced in suffering, and that makes Holy Thursday an important and sacred day for us.

Easter is a season of 50 days that leads us up to Pentecost, the birthday of the church, when the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Already the hoopla about Easter is over, and many of our guests have fulfilled their religious obligations until December 24th. But we are walking the road to Emmaus, looking for Jesus, and sometimes recognizing that He is here, with us. We come to His Table hoping against hope - as the first disciples hoped that the women who reported seeing the Risen Christ were to be trusted - we hope that Jesus will meet us here. We come to His Table knowing what He requires of us: that we love as He loves us; that we forgive others as He forgives us; and that through our love and service He is revealed. Amen.

Now I invite you to find the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the cream-colored insert that says "Insert Page 1" as we prepare to come to the Table, and I invite the Communion servers to join us.