

Then on the same day we find two of them going off to Emmaus, a village about seven miles from Jerusalem. As they went they were deep in conversation about everything that had happened. While they were absorbed in their serious talk and discussion, Jesus Himself approached and walked along with them, but something prevented them from recognizing Him. Then He spoke to them, "What is all this discussion that you are having on your walk?" They stopped, their faces drawn with misery, and the one called Cleopas replied, "You must be the only stranger in Jerusalem who hasn't heard all the things that have happened there recently!" "What things?" asked Jesus. "Oh, all about Jesus, from Nazareth. There was a man - a prophet strong in what He did and what He said, in God's eyes as well as the people's. Haven't you heard how our chief priests and rulers handed Him over for execution, and had Him crucified? But we were hoping He was the one who was to come and set Israel free. Yes, and as if that were not enough, it's getting on for three days since all this happened; and some of our women have disturbed us profoundly. For they went to the tomb at dawn, and then when they couldn't find His body they said that they had a vision of angels who said that He was alive. Some of our people went straight off to the tomb and found things just as the women had described them - but they didn't see Him!" Then Jesus spoke to them, "Aren't you failing to understand, and slow to believe in all that the prophets have said? Was it not inevitable that Christ should suffer like that and so find His glory?" Then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus explained to them everything in the scriptures that referred to Himself. They were by now approaching the village to which they were going. He gave the impression that He meant to go on further, but they stopped Him with the words, "Do stay with us. It is nearly evening and soon the day will be over." So Jesus went indoors to stay with them. Then it happened! While He was sitting at table with them He took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and passed it to them. Their eyes opened wide and they knew Him! But He vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Weren't our hearts glowing while He was with us on the road, and when He made the scriptures so plain to us?"

Luke 24: 13-32 JB Phillips New Testament

The Celts - ancient Scottish and Irish Christians - called it "thin space"; those places where the space between heaven and earth is almost transparent; where the space between heaven and earth seems to collapse; those places of mystical and spiritual energy. Physical places could be thin space, as could silence, singing, worship, conversation, a meal shared around a table... any of the places where we experience - where we catch a glimpse or taste of - the presence and love of God. Harvard theologian Peter Gomes writes, "There is in Celtic [belief] the notion of 'thin places' in the universe where the visible and the invisible world come into their closest proximity. Mountains and rivers are particularly favored as thin places marking invariably as they do, the horizontal and perpendicular frontiers. But perhaps the ultimate of these thin places in the human condition are the experiences people are likely to have as they encounter suffering, joy, and mystery." On this fifth Sunday of Easter... suffering, joy, and mystery - and thin space - seem to sum up the Easter experience.

The disciples' encounters with the Risen Christ were soon after His crucifixion. Crucifixion, as we know, was the Roman government's most brutal and humiliating form of capital punishment, meant to deter rebels and criminals. It certainly deterred Jesus' disciples from standing with and

standing up for Him during His arrest and trial. All of them abandoned Him. After His crucifixion, the gospels tell us that the disciples gathered behind closed and locked doors out of fear. Or they ventured outside only to their familiar fishing ground. Or they left town (was Emmaus somewhere they were running away to?)

Jesus was dead. Their hopes of the new kingdom Jesus talked about were dead. Jesus must not have been who He said he was. The road the disciples walked to Emmaus was paved with the sharp gravel of sorrow and hopelessness, and pebbles of guilt, and shame, and disappointment.

It was in these situations of grief and fear that the Risen Christ appeared to His disciples. He showed them His hands and His side. He showed them His wounds, the signs of His humanness, His vulnerability. He invited the disciples to touch his wounds. The Risen Christ appeared as evidence of the power of God over hell and death. And He appeared as evidence that God intimately understands human vulnerability and woundedness. Thank You God! because that takes away the need for us to be perfect images (or mirages) of anything: we are human, vulnerable, wounded, as our Lord was. We bear scars of our humanness, as He did. I'm not glorifying our wounds. I'm just saying we have them, and we don't have to pretend, for Christ's sake, that we are perfect, including perfectly

healed or perfectly happy. Instead let's remember that God's glory resides in us. We were made in God's image; we were imprinted with some of God's own divinity. We were imprinted with God's own vulnerable love.

Today's scripture drama was taken from Luke's gospel; the story of Jesus meeting the disciples on the walk to Emmaus. Discipleship as a journey is a common theme in Luke. The early Christians, mostly Jews, called this new faith as followers of Jesus "the journey" or "the way." Luke tells us that two disciples walked the road to Emmaus. Whatever hope and joy, whatever "thin space," they'd experienced with Jesus had died with Him. There was now no thought of heaven touching earth. Heaven was a illusion, and earth was stained with blood and broken dreams. Luke tells us that on the walk to Emmaus the disciples had faces "drawn with misery," and that when a stranger joined them on the road, they included Him in the sad retelling of all that had led up to Christ's crucifixion.

Luke says that the disciples' eyes were kept from recognizing that it was Jesus who walked with them. We are left to discern for ourselves what it means that their eyes were kept from recognizing Him. Was it their immersion of grief, their preoccupation with all they'd lost, or because Jesus was using this as another teaching-moment to reveal Himself and in His own good time open the eyes of His disciples? In other places in Luke's

gospel, the disciples were described thick-headed and slow to understand and unable to see who Jesus was. Here on the walk to Emmaus Jesus called the two disciples who walked with Him foolish and slow of heart.

Then beginning with Moses and the prophets, Jesus again told His disciples who He was - the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets and of all scripture - and explained that His suffering and death were necessary for the redemption of God's people, and for the salvation for sinners. His suffering and death were needed for His return, His ascension, to glory. (An aside: the apostle Paul would later write a heart-touchingly beautiful letter to the Hebrews about the necessity of Jesus experiencing suffering and death, and of how it benefits us. "Now that we know what we have - Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God - let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all - all but the sin. So let's walk right up to Him and get what He is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help. Hebrews 4:14-16)

On the walk to Emmaus the disciples reached the village they were going to, and Jesus kept walking, as if He were going on. The disciples invited Him to join them. Luke tells us they "urged Him strongly" to stay and eat with them. Notice here that Jesus never forces Himself on anyone; He

waits to be invited into our hearts and lives. Jesus was recognized by the disciples when He blessed and broke bread with His friends. The disciples realized themselves in the presence of the Risen Christ! It was a moment of thin space; that place where heaven and earth overlap and the distance between them is transparent. It was brief moment of thin space: Jesus was revealed in their presence, and then He vanished from their sight.

At the Passover supper, when Jesus ate and drank with His disciples, He blessed and broke bread and gave it to them with a cup of wine, as symbols of His body broken and His blood poured out. He told the disciples at that last meal that He wouldn't eat with them again until God's kingdom had come. And here He was, after walking the road to Emmaus with His disciples; the Risen Christ revealed in the blessing and breaking of bread. Evidence that God's kingdom had begun!

Jesus was known and criticized for eating and drinking with outcasts and sinners. Through what He did and said Jesus revealed the inclusive nature (where everyone is invited, everyone is valued, everyone is known to be God's child) of God's kingdom. These two disciples in the Emmaus story were sinners too, with little faith in Him. Again Jesus showed the nature of God's kingdom of love and mercy: sinners are forgiven and

redeemed, believers are entrusted and sent out to use their strength, passion, and love to reveal and help build God's kingdom.

I love this story of the walk to Emmaus. It's a delightful confirmation in scripture of thin places where the material world and the spiritual world overlay. There are two important lessons for us in this story. One is that when the disciples practiced hospitality Jesus was revealed. Hospitality and hospital have the same common root-word "*hospes*" which means shelter, care, and welcome of a guest. Of all the church could be and should be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to strive to be a place of hospitality: shelter, care, and welcome for all people. The church and the hospital have a similar goal: to provide care and hope for the sick, the broken, and the lost. Hospitals are good at advertising their services. We're not as good. Hospitals have big red "Emergency Entrance" signs over the doors to show sick and needy and desperate people where to go. What would our sign say about the church? What about: "Everyone is welcome. We mean everyone. Even you. Here everyone is valued, and cared for, and known as a child of God." (I know... it's got too many words. "Emergency Entrance" kind of says it all.)

The Risen Christ was revealed in an act of hospitality. Hospitality is where we, and others, can experience God. Hospitality can be thin space:

where heaven touches earth and God is revealed. The disciples were grieved and exhausted and probably dirty and sweaty from their long walk to Emmaus. I imagine they wanted nothing more than to rest, and to be alone. But ancient custom demanded that hospitality be extended to everyone, especially the stranger. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures hospitality is one of the hallmarks of God's people. The demand and expectation of hospitality came with the caveat that some people might unknowingly entertain angels!

Hospitality, rather than friendliness, extends itself. Hospitality might not something that comes naturally to us, but we can learn the practice of inviting people to share a meal, to share our time, to share some of who we are. I see in many areas of our congregation that we're working to make hospitality one of our hallmarks, so that Christ might be revealed.

The second lesson in the Emmaus story, and what I love best about it, is that when we tell about our experiences of God - recalling, as the disciples did, those times that our hearts were glowing with the love and grace of God - God is revealed again in the present. Our experience of God can help someone else recognize an experience of God. In sharing our own holy moments, God can be revealed in those places for someone else (as well as for us) where heaven and earth overlap: thin space. Sharing our

experiences of where heaven and earth touch (and God is revealed) is a way for us to witness to our faith, to be evangelists... a word that means both angel and bringer-of-good-news.

The story of the walk to Emmaus is a story about thin space: when the space between heaven and earth collapsed and the presence of the Risen Christ was revealed. Heaven and earth touched when the disciples extended hospitality to Jesus, when they broke bread with Him; and again when they shared the experience of the Risen Christ with each other. They remembered and marveled: "Weren't our hearts glowing while He was with us on the road, and when He made the scriptures so plain to us?" As we begin our time of silence, let's sing prayerfully sing *Open Our Eyes, Lord*, [printed in the bulletin] again. And as we sing let's be mindful of the presence of the Risen Christ, here, in our midst.

"Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus, to reach out and touch Him, and say that we love Him. Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen. Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus." Amen.