

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
April 22, 2012  
Third Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 4:5-12  
Psalm 98  
I John 1:1-2:2  
Luke 24:35-48

Our Gospel lesson today drops us down into a great story at the midway point of that story. Sort of like picking up the telephone and finding yourself listening in on a conversation that has been taking place for several minutes.

In this case, it is the story of the disciples who encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus that forms the first half of the story.

You recall that two dejected and disappointed disciples are returning home to Emmaus from Jerusalem after the crucifixion. On their way, Jesus appears and walks with them. The text says that they were prevented from recognizing Jesus, and Jesus asks them what they are talking about. They tell him of the events which have occurred, and how disappointed they are because they had pinned their hopes on this person Jesus.

The two disciples are so intrigued by Jesus that they invite him home with them. As they sit down to eat, Jesus breaks the bread, and in a “Eureka” type of moment, the disciples recognize him. Then immediately he is gone.

That is the first part of the conversation, the second half which picks up with our Gospel lesson today.

These two disciples now head back to Jerusalem (a distance of 15 miles or so!) to tell the others what they have seen and heard. When they arrive in Jerusalem, they find the others also know the good news.

As they come together, suddenly there stands Jesus in their midst. They are frightened, so he speaks peace to them. He wants them to be sure that he is not a ghost or a spirit, that it is really him -- bodily, in the flesh. So he invites them to touch him, and he asks them for something to eat.

Luke then tells us that the disciples still doubt, but it's a doubt borne from joy and astonishment. And we should not be too hard on them. For the resurrection event is not (as one scholar puts it), "something that anyone swallows whole without gagging on the meal. It is the unique act of God, a literally incredible act of power completely beyond the intellect of human beings." [John C.

Holbert, *Lectionary Homiletics*, 14:3, p. 37]

So Jesus in his patience takes these astonished believers again to the Scriptures, and explains all of what has transpired. Then he gives them a mission. He tells them to go and share this glorious message: there is forgiveness of sins for all people in Christ.

Now, what made the difference between the first part of the story and the second? What was it that turned these two disappointed disciples -- whose chins nearly scraped the dusty trail back to Emmaus -- into two adrenaline-rushed men whose feet barely touched the ground on their return to Jerusalem?

The obvious answer, of course, is that they had an encounter with Jesus. A life-changing encounter at that. Let's look at this encounter a little more closely.

A big part of this encounter comes as Jesus shares the Scriptures with them, and explains and interprets himself in those Scriptures.

Recall that early in the story the text says that the disciples were kept from recognizing Jesus, but later on they say: “did not our hearts burn within us as he explained the Scriptures to us?”

It is rather fascinating to me that Jesus could have shown up and overwhelmed them, but faith isn't usually generated that way. And today, in our day, Jesus could come to us and manifest himself personally to us in some miraculous way. He could overwhelm us with his power and his presence. But deep faith doesn't come that way very often. Deep faith often comes by gaining clarity about the meaning of Scripture.

This is why the power of the Scriptures to bring us to faith and to nurture our faith must never be taken for granted. In a day and age where we are inundated with words and where it is easy to take words for granted, we must remember the

special power of God's Word to create that of which it speaks and to change our lives.

In a congregation such as Epworth, where the Scriptures are spoken and read each week as they are, we might be tempted to become complacent, to ritualize the reading of Scripture, to say our perfunctory "thanks be to God" and leave it at that.

But how sad for us if we succumb to that temptation. For there is a healing and transforming power to God's Word in the Scriptures, and when they are read and proclaimed in our midst Jesus is present to us.

It was an encounter with the Scriptures that changed the lives of these two discouraged disciples and caused their hearts to burn. And those same Scriptures are what shape our lives today. For the Church is not under her own authority, but stands under the authority of the Christ revealed in the Scriptures.

But it was more than an encounter with the Scriptures that changed these traveling disciples. Something else was also at work here.

The stranger who opens the Scriptures to them so intrigues them that they invite him into their home for the night. While they are there, they sit down at the table. And in the breaking and sharing of bread, something happens. In that moment, the eyes of these disciples are opened again, and they realize that their invited *guest* has become their *host*.

Henri Nouwen reflects on this experience:

*All during his time with the disciples there had been no full communion. Yes, they had stayed with him and sat at his feet; yes, they had been his disciples, even his friends. But they had not yet entered into full communion with him. His body and blood and their body and blood had not yet become one. In many ways, he still had been the other, the one over there, the one who goes ahead of them and shows them the way. But when they eat the bread he gives them and they recognize him, that recognition is a deep spiritual awareness that, now, he dwells in their innermost being, that now, he breathes in them, speaks in them, yes lives in them. When they eat the bread that he hands them, their lives are transformed into his life. It is not longer they who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in them.*

*...This is what we live in the Eucharistic celebration. This too is what we live when we live a Eucharistic life. It is a communion so intimate, so holy, so sacred, and so spiritual that our corporeal selves can no longer reach it. No longer can we see him with our mortal eyes, hear him with our mortal ears, or touch him with our mortal bodies. He has come to us at that place within us where the powers of darkness and evil cannot reach, where death has no access.* [With Burning Hearts, p. 73]

In a congregation such as Epworth, where gathering at the Table is a regular and central part of our life together, we might be tempted to take it for granted, to ritualize it, to see it as mere words, symbols, and actions.

But how sad for us if we do so. For at the Table we are encountered by Jesus in ways which go beyond our human knowing. In his *absence*, he is truly *present* to us, giving us grace to meet our needs and to change our lives.

It is not a stretch, then, to say that this powerful encounter between these disciples and Jesus was literally an encounter of *Word and Table*. Through the opening of the Scriptures and the breaking of bread, they were changed. They are

changed from confused and frightened observers into courageous *witnesses*. Our readings from the Acts of the Apostles shows us this transformation in full force as it plays out.

And it doesn't stop there. For Jesus says *to us* as he did to them, "go and tell." In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus invites us to share the new life he gives us with others.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, my prayer for each of us is that the words of today's collect will become reality. May our own experience of Word and Table this morning do something *to us* and *in us*. May our eyes truly be opened to behold him in all his redeeming work, so that we may be his instruments of hope and healing to a needy world.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.