

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 30, 2017
Third Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:14, 36-47
Psalm 116:10-17
I Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

The story in our Gospel lesson today is unique to Luke, and reveals a fascinating encounter between Jesus and two of his disciples several hours after Jesus' resurrection.

It happens on the road to Emmaus, a village about seven miles from Jerusalem. These followers of Jesus walk sadly along, carrying their dashed hopes that Jesus was the Anointed Messiah with them. As they walk, Jesus appears beside them and engages them in conversation, but they are kept from recognizing him.

After they share their disappointment with Jesus and their confusion about all that has happened, he takes them on a tour of their own Scriptures and shows them how what they've just experienced was foretold in those Scriptures.

This causes their hearts to burn within them, but they still do not recognize Jesus. More specifically, it's not simply that they do not recognize him, but we are told that they *are kept from recognizing him*. I've often been puzzled by this. Why would they be kept from recognizing Jesus here? (Hold that question – it will be answered in due time.)

The episode continues and the disciples find themselves with Jesus at the table. Still hidden from them, he *takes* bread, *blesses* it, *breaks* it, and *gives* it to them. In that moment their eyes are opened, and they recognize him. And in that same moment, he vanishes from their sight.

As I struggle to make sense of this event, two important questions always surface for me: (1) Why were these disciples able to recognize Jesus *only after he sat at table with them and broke the bread*? (2) Why is it that as soon as they *did* recognize him, he vanished from their sight?

The answer lies in the breaking of the bread, but Jesus' action of breaking the bread needs to be "unpacked" a bit. By that I mean that because what Jesus does here with these two disciples is *identical* to what he does at the Last Supper, we need to go back to the Last Supper and the context behind it.

You remember that on Maundy Thursday I shared how that in the time of Jesus, the expectation of the people was that a "new" Moses would come to lead the people on a "new" Exodus to a new Promised Land.

The original Exodus was launched by the dramatic actions of the *Passover*, the main feature of which was the sacrifice of an unblemished male lamb. An oft forgotten and neglected truth about the Passover was the fact that it was not complete merely with the sacrificial death of the lamb – but by the act of *eating* the lamb.

At the Last Supper while Jesus and his disciples celebrate Passover, Jesus began to show his disciples that he was the *not only* the *new Moses* ready to lead the people on a new Exodus, but that he was the very Passover Lamb who would be sacrificed in order to do so. He speaks clearly to his disciples about his body being broken and his blood being poured out. And this Passover was not consummated in that room on Thursday, but as he hung on the Cross on Friday and cried, “It is finished.”

But the story did not end there. In the original Exodus, the children of Israel had to be fed and cared for on their long journey to the Promised Land. And God did exactly that. He provided them supernatural food – manna – which fell from heaven daily to feed the people on their journey.

When you come back into the first century at the time of Jesus, not only did the people expect a new Moses to lead them on a new Exodus, but they also expected that when it took place the Messiah would restore and provide once again the supernatural manna from heaven.

An interesting hint of this is found in the “Bread of Life” discourse in John chapter 6. The people are questioning Jesus, demanding a sign from him to prove that he is the Messiah. In doing so, they make a very telling statement. They say to him:

...What sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'he gave them bread from heaven to eat.' (John 6:30-31, RSV)

When the people ask Jesus what sign he will perform here, they are not just providing a generic example when they reference the manna. They are saying:

“Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; we know that when the Messiah comes, he will lead us on a new Exodus and will restore the manna from heaven. So, if you are the Messiah, prove it – produce the manna.”

And as part of his response to them, Jesus says:

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh. (John 6:48-51, RSV)

When we return again to the Last Supper, not only does Jesus show the disciples that he is the new Passover Lamb, but by his words and actions with the bread and the wine he also shows them that *he himself* is the new manna, the new supernatural food given to the people of a New Covenant.

The people of a New Covenant are also journeying toward the Promised Land. Their Promised Land is the New Jerusalem, having been rescued from slavery to sin by the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world, Jesus himself. And, like the children of Israel under the Old Covenant, New Covenant people also need to be fed and nourished on their journey. Like them, we need

supernatural food – living bread, a new manna. Such is exactly what Jesus described himself to be.

So now, back to our text, and this encounter between Jesus and these two disciples. And back to my original questions which have always puzzled me.

First, why were these disciples *prevented* from recognizing Jesus? I'm not sure, but one implication of this seems certain: In his resurrected body, Jesus is able to appear under whatever form he wishes. In his resurrected body, Jesus can hide himself.

Second, why were these disciples only able to recognize Jesus when he broke the bread, and why did he vanish immediately thereafter?

I think the answer here is that Jesus was showing the disciples the way he would be present with them from now on. After his ascension into heaven, he would no longer be with them under the appearance of a man. From then on, he would be present to them under the appearance of Eucharistic bread.

The risen Jesus can appear *when* he wills, *where* he wills, *how* he wills, and under whatever form he wills. He can hide himself, just as he did on the road to Emmaeus. And after his resurrection and ascension, his normal manner of appearing to his disciples will not be in the form of a man, but under the veil of the Eucharist. That is why these disciples go back to Jerusalem “rejoicing that he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

On this third Sunday of Easter, I would submit to you that the risen Jesus is still present, still supernaturally feeding those who through the New Covenant are on a new Exodus, journeying toward the Promised Land of the New Jerusalem. And I don't need to tell you how it happens.

So come with faith. Open your hearts and feed on this Living Bread. And give thanks.

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