

Never the Guest
By Reverend Litton Logan
April 30, 2017

Scriptures:

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." ²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?" ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Luke 24:13--35 (NRSV),

Sermon:

It is believed that the Gospel of Luke was written toward the end of the first century of the Common Era by a well-educated Hellenistic Jew in Ephesus. He writes during a period when Christianity was highly suspect as a new religion or a form of Judaism that was disloyal to Rome. Therefore, the author goes to great lengths to correct such suspicions by showing that the followers of Jesus are no threat to Rome and deserving of the concessions and protections of Rome normally extended to the Jews. In fact, the author of Luke wants his audience and the Roman world to understand that the followers of Jesus are the true Israel and their community of faith or churches supersedes the Jews and the synagogue, especially since the Temple has been

destroyed as the result of those rebellious and disloyal Jerusalem Jews, who, incidentally, also killed Jesus.

This story of the two disciples and their encounter with the resurrected Jesus enroute from Jerusalem to the town of Emmaus is found only in Luke's Gospel. If you were one of Luke's early, Jewish Jesus-believers, who was struggling with your faith considering Jesus not having returned to complete his work as the Messiah, these scriptures would have had special meaning to you. Why? Well, these scriptures are in effect a summary of Jesus' life, ministry, and death placed in a much, much larger Jewish messianic frame of reference after the destruction of the Jewish Temple and the early Jerusalem apostolic community of Jesus believers.

As a caveat, Luke often conflates events, times, and places for his purposes. So, let's imagine you have been a part an extended group, but not one of the inner circle, of Jesus' followers for a while. Every chance you've had, you have gone to hear him speak and to bask in the hope that he was the one, the Messiah, who would usher in the fullness of God's rule and reign for your Jewish world, bringing peace, justice, and prosperity. After all, he did seem to have all the prophetic credentials, including the powers to heal, confront, and confound the ruling elite. You, along with many others, dreamed of how it was going to be for people like you, people who lived under the oppressive thumbs of your aristocracy and their Roman masters. You could just taste the happy, peaceful, and prosperous days ahead under the Messiah's rule.

However, the person you had pinned your hopes upon has been humiliated, dishonored, and killed. Now, you must return to your daily life and come to grips with the fact that you have been made a fool of by this Jesus of Nazareth and his delusions of grandeur and all its associated hype; or worse yet, you have made a fool of yourself by daring to hope and to believe yet once again. However, that's just the way things are for folks like you - people, who are at the bottom of the heap; people who get their hopes up only to be disappointed time after time. Fools, why even bother to hope?

You and a friend, who was also a part of the extended circle of Jesus' followers, are returning home from Jerusalem. As you walk along, you are engaged in a deep and intense discussion about the events of the last few days, especially the report of the women that morning. You are trying to make some sense out of what has happened. Somehow, if you can make everything that has happened fit into some sense of how things are supposed to work, you can rescue yourself from being a total fool.

A stranger, striding along in your direction, overtakes and joins you and your friend. This is not uncommon for someone traveling alone to seek companionship and safety in numbers. However, this guy interjects himself into your conversation: "Hey fellows, I couldn't help overhearing your discussion. What's happened?"

Since it was obvious from the direction this guy had come, he had been in Jerusalem. These disciples ask the stranger, "Fellow, where have you been these last few days? Our leaders delivered Jesus of Nazareth to the Romans for crucifixion."³²[Our people] were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority" (Luke 4:32) and did many wonderful things. We had hoped he was the Messiah and would wrench our country from the hands of the corrupt and harsh aristocracy and their Roman handlers to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth, restoring Israel's honor among the nations and peace and prosperity to the land.

Not only this, but some women went to his tomb this morning and found his body gone. They told us they had seen an angel, who told them he was alive. Following up on the women's story, some of the other disciples went to the tomb and found it just as they women had said - empty. But we don't know what to think. We don't know if he is alive or someone just took his body.

Then this stranger presumptuously scolds the disciples in a terse and condescending manner.

²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

These two disciples hadn't recognized Jesus as he spoke to them. Luke wants us to understand that their failure to recognize Jesus was due to divine constraints. Why you may wonder? Well these disciples obviously needed to get the bigger picture about Jesus' death before they could have truly seen or understood him as the crucified and resurrected Son of God Messiah, not just a revived Jesus of Nazareth - a prophet and folk healer. Yet, even while Jesus was speaking, there was something vaguely familiar and compelling about him and his words.

These two disciples, in keeping with the Ancient Near East customs of hospitality, invite Jesus, insisting that he not only come and eat with them but stay the night. As they sit down to the table, Jesus, the guest, contrary to all customs assumes the role of the host and breaks and distributes the bread. Suddenly, the disciple's constraints are lifted and they recognize Jesus. Just as suddenly, though; he vanishes. What!?

They looked at each other after the initial shock wore off and said — (I take some liberties at this point): *You know, we should have guessed that was him. Didn't you feel the old passion well up again as we walked along and listened to him. Didn't you feel the thrill of our previously held hopes as he unfolded scripture and gave us divine insights, meaning, and purpose to recent events? Couldn't you just feel something was afoot when he took the bread, instead of one of us, blessed and broke it just as he did that day when he fed us among the multitude?*

So, maybe we haven't been fooled. Maybe, we didn't waste our time following a false messiah after all. By golly, those women were right; he is not still dead and in the tomb. And, as he explained the scriptures about the Messiah, it all made sense - Holy Sense. He is back to resume his interrupted mission. Come, let us hurry and go tell the others that we too know that the Lord is alive because now we have seen him.

In accordance with the Jewish tradition requiring two male witnesses, these men return to the disciples in Jerusalem to testify that they had seen the resurrected Jesus. Those believers in the closing years of the first century would have understood this story as an explanation for how they knew, understood, and recognized the presence of a living Christ through the witness of others without ever having seen a resurrected Jesus, but also, how he fit perfectly into their historical Jewish faith with an eye on the future coming of the kingdom. Even though he had disappeared, his words and their insights burned within them.

In this Emmaus story, we see, as did those early believers, the truth of the living Christ. The living Christ was present to those early Christians, as to us, through hearing the words of the prophets interpreted through Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection; thereby, anchoring all believers for all times in God's providential will from Moses onward.

The witness of these two disciples enroute to Emmaus along with all the other witnesses to a resurrected Jesus gave Luke's church, with its more inclusive perspectives, holy direction, holy meaning, and holy purpose for its life just as it does for ours today in the absence of our having seen the resurrected Jesus. In addition, every time followers of Jesus across the ages have come together in holy fellowship - be that at a church potluck, dinner in one another's homes, in restaurants together, or at the communion table - to break bread together, Christ is the host - never the guest.

This story of two disciples on the road to Emmaus as much as it is a community story of faith; I think it can also represent events in our personal lives. Let me opine a bit. Sometimes we need to get away; we need to go to Emmaus, to get emotional and physical distance from awful things that have happened to us, things that we've done, or our failed hopes and expectations in life. The road to Emmaus can be symbolic of getting away to reassess, remember, and reenounter the Spirit of Christ so as to hear anew the words of God within a greater perspective of loss, tragedy, disappointment, promise, and, yes, hope. It is a story about finding new directions - even if it means that direction is heading back into Jerusalem, a place we sought to leave behind that represents defeat, disappointment, and death. However, under the power of the Holy Spirit, places of defeat and regret can become places that stand for victory, reigniting our life-weary and world-damaged souls with a new understanding of the living Christ.

We have not seen a resurrected Jesus either; he has not returned to date as many expect, but we have heard God's word proclaimed, taught, and well-reasoned over the years. In the presence of the Holy Spirit, our hearts have often burned with the thrill of having ascended to a truth about God's love in Jesus the Christ that goes beyond logic and physical evidence. It is a truth, an over-plus of meaning if you will, that gives power to our symbols of faith, such as the cross, the empty tomb, the bread and cup, and even to our prayers.

What the mind cannot logically grasp, the heart seems to ascend to so easily. Where the mind needs facts to believe, the spirit needs only to be open to the possibilities of an encounter with holy truth. However, for some of us, we are a little slow of heart, slow to trust spirit-knowledge, aren't we? Like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we want to find meaning for our lives that makes sense logically and to our five senses, even if the only meaning we find is hopelessness. So, sometimes the Spirit may not let us see until we have listened, learned, reassessed, and been open to an encounter with the living Christ, who may be not who we expected and lets us down.

To this I add, that people often resist the divine truth in Jesus the Christ overtaking them, interjecting itself into their lives, changing them, and redirecting them, which leads them back into the places of disappointment, defeat, and doubt to become victors because of their egocentric expectations, their misguided myths about Jesus, and their need to belong to a certain group of people.

When Christians come together in social and spiritual solidarity whether around the communion table, a church potluck, or wherever and if we are open to divine possibilities, we may just experience a little slip in reality like those two disciples - a slip that will bring to our awareness the presence of Christ beyond any moment of ritual, religion, or symbol. We may for just an instant see the face of Christ in those setting across the table from us. In our solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we encounter all that is real and present in the living Christ; which is, we are loved and cared for by one another and held in high regards in the body of Christ.

I urge for our sakes, the Church's sake, and the world's sake that we revisit the burning joy of our hearts, when we first heard the words of God that introduced us to the living Christ in a community of faith. I pray that we will allow the Holy Spirit to come to us, combat our fears, despair, confusion, doubts, and life-weariness as we too travel with our brothers and sisters in Christ from here to there and back again in divine hope and victory. Also, let us be willing to go and tell others that in spite of all that may have happened to us or all that we may have done we know the Christ lives - he lives within our hearts and we give witness to his being alive in the community of the redeemed as we love one another, help and care for one another, and allow the living Christ to serve us.