

Easter III (A)
Acts 2.36.41/Psalm 116/I Peter 1.17-23/Luke 24.13-35
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
6 April 2008

Eyes Wide Open

~Paul H. Friesen~

Well, this is the Third Sunday of Easter. And we are still hearing the stories, the recollections, of our ancestors about the resurrected Jesus. Nothing made more of an impact than this upon the earliest church.

Again, today's Gospel carries with it the excitement and the confusion of these earliest days. As it was with the other stories, so it is here. A lot of energy is given to describing this meeting of Jesus with his disciples. But there isn't much anxiety about harmonizing all the details with the details of the other stories.

It is the 'same day', Resurrection Sunday, so this story seems to fall between the empty tomb experiences of the women at day break, and the story we heard last week, the frightened evening dinner behind locked doors.

The story begins with two disciples that afternoon, walking away from Jerusalem to Emmaus, one unnamed, the other named Cleopas. The story concludes, after their encounter with Jesus, with them rushing back to Jerusalem to join the eleven distraught disciples who in their fear have bolted themselves in.

In fact, in the next few verses beyond ours we hear Jesus stepping into the midst of the eleven and these two late comers, saying ‘Peace be with you.’¹ And with these words we are again back in the story we heard last week, except in Luke’s version of it—in which as we have just heard these two have interrupted the huddle before Jesus’ arrival.

Today’s Gospel story doesn’t answer some of the questions we have simply because they weren’t as important to the early church—not everything in their minds or conversation was passed on as significant for the Gospel story. For instance, who was Cleopas, and who was his unnamed friend?

For instance, we hear only here today in Luke’s Gospel that ‘Simon’ (almost certainly Simon Peter), had already met the risen Jesus. We’re told no more. Yet in all the other Gospel stories Simon Peter meets only the empty tomb, after he hears the stories of the women.

In fact, in the verses leading up to today’s Gospel story in Luke, nobody has met Jesus.² The women are terrified at meeting the angel. The male disciples are contemptuous towards the women: ‘These words seemed to them to be and idle tale, and they would not believe them.’ Simon Peter then sees the empty tomb... and is amazed, but—goes home! Was his first meeting with Jesus, a purely spiritual one? We don’t know.

All of this is swirling around today’s story. *So what did Luke want us to think about?*

¹ Luke 24.36-43. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless noted.

² Luke 24.1-12.

Maybe you thought about what caught my attention—the turning point in the story. ‘Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.’

What was the meaning of this afternoon these two spent in the company of the resurrected Jesus? Erasmus, the Roman Catholic scholar who inspired Luther and so many Protestant reformers puts it well: ‘When Jesus was taken away in body they now saw him better than when he was with them in body.’

Was that afternoon wasted because these two followers of Jesus didn’t recognize Jesus till the very end of their meeting? Not at all! And for this reason the story has been important since it was first told, and is important for us today, for whom the story comes ‘2000 years late’.

What has your year been like—I mean your year leading up to this Easter season, the season of the Resurrection? What has your last week been like? Has it been worth any thing if as a Christian, you have not been aware of the presence of the risen Christ?

Has your commitment to Christ in personal prayer and shared worship meant anything? Have your failed attempts to sort through confusion and fear like the disciples failed attempts meant anything? According to Luke, these experiences do begin to mean something critically important when you meet the risen Lord.

The Gospel takes us right to the moment after Jesus left Cleopas and his friend. ‘They 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?” It was right at that point, the point of understanding, that they began to act, and joined the others in Jerusalem.

It is meeting the resurrected Lord that makes sense of what has been happening to us, that helps us understand how in fact the Lord has been with us all along.

Let’s go back to the moment of recognition. Jesus’ two fellow travellers urge Jesus to stay with him. They have been telling him the story of their experiences, ignorant that they are talking with the main character of their story. He has in turn been interpreting the story of Jesus, his story, to them through the Scriptures.

Their moment of recognition hangs on their faithfulness to Jesus in what they believe is his absence. This is what is passed down to us as the way to prepare for meeting the risen Lord. We don’t gather together for worship only when we’ve had a good spiritual week, or because we’ve had a good week.

We gather to be faithful to the Jesus we are pledged to in baptism and by profession of faith. We gather to hear the scriptures and reflect on our experiences. We don’t gather because we ‘have it all together’—as we used to say.

We gather in faith, in spite of how real or unreal our faith has been to us, how negative or positive our experiences have been. We gather regardless of how confused or certain we feel about our lives in relation to the life of faith.

And that is how Cleopas and his friend lived. Their instinct was rooted in ancient Mediterranean hospitality, as was Jesus' response. Maritimers know it. 'You'll stay with us? No, really, you're too kind. No, you must stay over and eat with us. We won't take no for an answer. Alright then, I'll stay.'

But what began in instinct, and had been enriched by faithfulness to the story of Jesus, yields a big surprise.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

If this sounds familiar, it is. These words of taking bread, blessing, breaking, giving, were the words at the Last Supper recorded by Luke. They are the words recorded by St. Paul as the tradition handed on to him, to be repeated at all Eucharists. And they are the words that have been used since, and we will hear later during our worship.³ There can be no doubt that Luke was thinking about what his fellow Christians, a few decades later were still doing.⁴

These words invite us to meet Jesus as we break bread together; to see Jesus as we gather around the Lord's Table and remember Jesus' death and resurrection for us and for the rest of the world.

These words invite us to take our lives this week, and call for God's blessing on their brokenness, and share

³ Luke 22.19; I Corinthians 11.23-26; and see for instance the Anglican 'Eucharistic Prayers' in the *Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p. 82 and the *Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: ABC, 1985), p. 193-210.

⁴ 'The language...points irresistibly to the action of Jesus at the last supper,' I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), p.898.

them with those around us. These words invite us to take our Parish, and call for God's blessing on its brokenness, and to share its life.

We will head off in all four directions when we leave today. And the mission we've been given comes right out of this story, and so many Gospel stories. As we worship here, so we are meant to worship wherever we go.

And perhaps there is no more clear and obvious way to do it, then to think of Jesus' words to our ancestors and to us this morning.

We arrive to worship, perhaps not knowing how Jesus has been walking with us all week, or perhaps for months or even years. We are meant to leave taking the story of Jesus with us. We are meant to leave living out the story of Jesus, who took bread that meant his life, and blessed it, and broke it, and shared it for the salvation of the world.

God, in Christ, gave himself to the world to redeem what he created so good, but has corrupted into what you have read in the papers and seen on the news. It is not only with our lips, but with our lives that we take Christ's saving work with us.

You probably didn't expect this sermon to end up with a story about a lottery, but here goes! I don't buy tickets, and I think all forms of gambling trap a lot of damaged people and damage a lot of them much more. But the story begins with the lottery and ends in grace.

Maybe you saw this week the item about the Portuguese butcher who won a pile of money—millions.

The remarkable thing is that he seems to have responded in keeping with his commendable character. He owns the butcher shop, so gave handsome gifts to every employee—and he ordered meat without end to give away to his customers.

He seemed to know them all by name and they knew him—a multicultural microcosm of the huge city in which he lives. His good fortune led him to give away his person, not just this money, right where he'd always been, and plans to remain.

It's not as good a story as today's Gospel. But if this gent can do this, what can we do with the gift of the resurrected Lord—right where we are, with the same neighbours we left this morning, walking the same routes we did this week?

Amen.