

The Heart of the Matter

“The Walk to Emmaus”

[Luke 24:13-35](#)

Today’s scripture that the Hallinan family beautifully presented to us as a dramatic reading is one of the most powerful stories in the Bible.

On the day of Jesus’ resurrection, two of his followers walk 7 miles from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. As they are walking, they talk about the things that have happened in the last three days. Jesus joins them in the midst of their conversation and asks what they were discussing. They are surprised that he did not know what had happened in Jerusalem. So they tell him all about Jesus and what happened to him. He listens to their story. But, they do not realize whom they are talking to. Then, calling them foolish and slow to believe, Jesus explains to them what the Scriptures say about Christ. They still do not know who he is. When they arrive home, they invite Jesus to stay with them. At their dinner table, when Jesus takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and begins to give it to them, they finally recognize him. Suddenly, Jesus vanishes from their sight, and they immediately get up and go back to Jerusalem and tell his disciples about their encounter.

Actually, this beautiful Easter story appears in the Gospel of Mark as well. Hear Mark’s version: “Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest, but they did not believe them either.” That’s all – the whole incident is recorded in just these few verses. Apparently, Luke took Mark’s story and elaborated on it with many details that he had collected from other sources. Certainly, Luke is an incredibly gifted storyteller. We know the beautiful Christmas stories as well as the many wonderful parables of Jesus he recorded in his Gospel.

By the way, there is something very interesting about Luke’s Easter stories. He differs from the other gospel writers about to whom Jesus appeared first after his resurrection. In the Gospels of Mark and John, it is Mary Magdalene who meets the risen Christ first. In Matthew, when Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, she is not alone but with another Mary. But, in Luke, Jesus appears neither to the women nor to his disciples but to the two followers in today’s story.

Then who were the two people Jesus showed himself first to after his resurrection? We already know one person’s name. It’s Cleopas. As depicted in most paintings of the story, Cleopas’ travel companion is commonly assumed to be another male. But, there is a scripture that leads us to another conclusion: The Gospel of John lists several people who were standing near the cross of Jesus, and one of them was Mary, the wife of Cleopas (John 19:25). And so, the second person in the story is also thought to be Cleopas’ wife.

It is highly likely that Cleopas and his wife, Mary, were devoted followers of Jesus. They accompanied Jesus and his 12 disciples to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. After everything was over, they were now going back home. We are told that they were talking and discussing all the things that had happened. Talking about and discussing what you have learned and experienced, sharing your insights and asking your questions of faith, these are what we, Christians, are called to do to grow in our faith.

Cleopas and Mary were having their own small group on their way back home. And they remind us that Christian faith is not a private matter, but a communal affair.

Imagine what was racing through their minds and what was weighing on their hearts when they walked to Emmaus. Just three days ago, they witnessed the death of their beloved Rabbi on the cross. The emotions must have still been very raw. Entering Jerusalem with him a week ago, surrounded by a crowd of people who were shouting Hosannas, their hopes were running high. They truly believed their Rabbi was the Messiah about whom their prophets had foretold and the whole nation was anticipating for generations. They thought they were nearing the day when he would take their nation from the hands of the Roman Empire and restore its glory. His 12 disciples were even discussing who would take what positions in the new governing order. All seemed to be falling into place.

Then, suddenly, after their Passover meal, Jesus was arrested by the Roman authorities, betrayed by one of his own disciples. He stood at trial alone, as even Peter, his most trusted disciple, denied him. Helplessly, he was subjected to humiliation and suffering. I am sure his disciples and followers were hoping that God would intervene on his behalf. But, it never happened. Jesus suffered on the cross, and there he took his last breath. And, he was buried. His crucifixion had shattered their hopes and dreams completely. In the death of Jesus, all the hopes and dreams they had of him being the Messiah who would redeem his people came crashing down, falling into pieces. In addition to being sad, they must have felt very disappointed and confused, wondering what to do next. And their hearts were likely filled with great fear and anxiety. The news of Jesus' empty tomb that some women followers had reported would have added even more fear. So, perhaps Cleopas and Mary had decided they were going back home to Emmaus.

In the midst of their confusion and disappointment, in the midst of their sadness and hopelessness, in the midst of their fear and anxiety, as they are leaving the disciples and other followers of Jesus behind, the risen Lord comes along and walks with them. They are not alone. Jesus is there with them on their lonely and fearful journey. Yet, they do not even recognize him. And of course not! How could they have imagined that the stranger was Jesus? They knew he was dead. They knew he had been buried. They knew the dead would not, could not, come back to life. And so, even though he was standing right in front of their eyes, they did not recognize him.

When we have preconceived ideas or expectations, we cannot see and hear correctly. I remember one day I got very frustrated because I could not find a restaurant where my friends and I were supposed to meet for dinner together. It was in a rather small town, and also I had been there a few times before, so I did not check the driving directions before I hit the road. When I arrived at the place where I was sure the restaurant was, it was not there. It was before we had mobile phones or a GPS in the car. So, I just drove around and around, looking for the restaurant. I found myself circling the same block and going up and down the same street over and over again in vain. It was a very frustrating experience. When I finally found the restaurant, I was shocked to realize that I had driven by it many times, but somehow I did not see it! Driving around, I had missed the restaurant again and again because I was not looking for it at that specific location. I was sure it was somewhere else...

Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, lives! He is alive today. He walks with us, and he talks with us. Yet, how often do we miss our encounter with him? How often do we not recognize him in our lives because of our preconceived ideas about him? Today's Easter story tells us that Jesus shows up in the most unexpected places, when we least expect him to be there. In the moments of our lives when we feel alone or isolated, when all hope seems lost, in the places of our vulnerability and fear, the risen Christ

comes to us and listens to our stories and helps us to make meaning out of them. He helps us to see signs of God's salvation and healing even in the worst of times.

Today's story has a fascinating ending. The two followers of Jesus invite him, a stranger to them, into their home. Through the course of their meal together, the guest somehow becomes the host and gives to them the gift that Jesus had given during the last supper he had shared with them. It is at their table of hospitality and fellowship that Cleopas and Mary's eyes are finally opened to who the stranger in their midst had been. When they suddenly recognize Jesus, he disappears from their sight. And it is only in looking back that they remember how their hearts were burning when they were listening to him open up the scriptures to them while on the road. As soon as they realize what has happened, they get up and go back to Jerusalem immediately without any hesitation. They need to share their experience with the disciples and other followers of Jesus. They need to tell them that they have seen the risen Lord. With their hearts burning with desire again, they cannot wait to tell others about their Easter experience – how Jesus met them so unexpectedly, when they least expected it.

Friends, in the midst of the pandemic, it is difficult to embrace the joy of Easter. Our minds are distracted by the chaos and uncertainty that surround us. Our hearts are heavy with grief, weighed down by the worries over the loss of our loved ones, our jobs, our hopes and dreams, our way of life. We wonder if we'll ever be able to go back to the normal life that we used to have. But, hear the good news this morning: "Do not be afraid." Again, as Jesus said to his disciples, as our spiritual ancestors hear again and again, "Do not be afraid." Jesus comes to us in the midst of our fears and anxieties, in the midst of our brokenness, in the midst of our sadness, and he walks with us. He helps us to remember that God's story of salvation and healing is not finished yet, that death does not have the final word in our lives.

May the Holy Spirit give us the courage to open our hearts and minds to receive this good news today. That no matter what, we do not walk alone and that God is not finished with us yet. May the Holy Spirit give us the courage to welcome the stranger and extend our hospitality to those who walk with us, even if it has to be virtually for now. For it is at the table of hospitality and fellowship that our eyes may be opened to the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. And may the Holy Spirit give us the courage to share our encounter with the living Christ with our community. For those living in fear need to hear witnesses testifying to the presence of the living God who is ever near and making all things new. Thanks be to God!
Amen.