

COMMUNING WITH JESUS

(05/06/18)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 16:12-13

Luke 24:13-35

“After this [after appearing to Mary Magdalene] he [Jesus] appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.” (Mk 16:12-13)

Have you ever had a chance encounter with someone you knew in the past but just didn't recognize? All of a sudden there is an experience of recognition, of reconnection. This happened to me last summer at the conference I attended in New York City. One of the attendees remembered me from 1986, the year we both studied at the C. G. Jung Institute—Zurich. When I first saw her I didn't recognize her, but when she told me her name it all came back to me. We were part of a group of expatriates that used to hang around and drink good Swiss beer (and, of course, study Jungian psychology). She went on to become a Jungian psychoanalyst in Dallas, as I have in Boston. It was nice to reconnect and reminisce!

This morning we are focusing on just such a surprise encounter: the account of how two of Jesus' followers rediscover him on the road to Emmaus. This is one of my favorite recorded post-resurrection encounters with the risen Christ, one that is especially meaningful for us today, on a Communion Sunday during the Easter season.

This passage, which appears in Mark and Luke, for some reason does not appear in either Matthew or John. As you heard, Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, describes the encounter in rather terse terms. He says,

After this [after appearing to Mary Magdalene] he [Jesus] appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

That's it. Mark devotes two verses to the encounter; Luke takes twenty-three. Mark records no dialogue, while Luke does. Mark presents the men as two of the original disciples. In Luke, it is clear that the two men, Cleopas and an unnamed follower, are not of the original twelve but are two of Jesus' "followers." After their encounter with Jesus, the men return to where the "eleven were gathered together." This means that they could not have been two of the original twelve, now eleven after Judas'

death, though they must have been close members of the core since they “returned” to where the others were gathered together. (This feels a little like biblical detective work!)

According to both Mark and Luke, when people try to share their experience of the risen Christ, the disciples and the other followers do not believe them. Mark tells us that after Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, Mary goes and tells “those who had been with him,” in other words, his disciples. Mark says, “But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.”

We can’t really blame the disciples for not believing Mary or the two followers who encountered Jesus as they were walking in the country. After all, the story is a little unbelievable. In fact, it is very unbelievable! In fact, most people in our world today still don’t believe it happened!

Immediately following his appearance to the two men, Jesus appears to the eleven as they sit at table. He upbraids them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they did not believe those who saw him after he had risen. This passage suggests that not only our faith but also the hardness or softness of our heart are major factors in whether we believe that Jesus still lives and whether we experience his presence as the risen Lord. I like that expression—the “hardness of our heart.” The hardness of our heart can keep us from seeing Jesus. Don’t you think this is true?

According to both Mark and Luke there is another reason why Jesus’ followers do not recognize him. Mark tells us “he appeared in another form to two of them.” Mark doesn’t say what that form was. It was obviously a human form, but it must have been a different human form. Had Jesus’ facial features changed? If so, how and why?

The two followers who are traveling from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus are probably heading home, discouraged at the turn of events. Like the other disciples, they are probably returning to their previous life, to the life they lived before they became followers of Jesus, before they became disciples of the Way. They are going backwards.

While they walk and talk with each other about what has transpired, Jesus draws near to them and joins them. The two men do not recognize Jesus. Luke tells us “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” I don’t know whether Jesus was testing them or just playing a game, but he apparently doesn’t want them to recognize him.

As they walk together, in response to Jesus' feigned ignorance the two men explain to him what has happened. Even when Jesus upbraids them for being "foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" they do not recognize him. Even when "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interprets to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" they do not recognize him.

The most important question is not how the disciples did or did not experience the risen Lord, but how *we* do or do not experience him. This is because the story of Jesus, though it is history, is much more than history. As we note during Advent, Jesus was born of Mary, but it is even more important that he be born in us. We read how he healed many people, but we need to discover his healing power within ourselves. Just as he died on the cross, we need to die to our egocentrism to be born again to new life in Christ. Just as he rose from the dead, we need to break free of the containers that entomb us. If we do not do this, our religion is nothing more than second-hand religion, believing what other people experienced but not experiencing it ourselves, not allowing it to become a living reality in our lives.

The two men must have some vague sense of what is going on because they "constrain" Jesus; they "implore" him to stay with them in Emmaus. They know that something special is happening, but they can't quite put it all together. They try to hold onto him until they figure it out. At least we have to give them credit for that!

When they are at table, Jesus "took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. At that moment, the Holy Spirit opened their eyes and they recognized him." This suggests that these two men may have been with Jesus at the Last Supper. This is why they recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

Like these two followers of Jesus, we, too, can experience our Lord in the breaking of the bread. This is because Jesus is not limited to time and space—he is eternal! He is not limited to any particular form, e.g., to his human form. He is with us not only in this sacrament but wherever we go in our journey as individuals and as a Christian community. He travels with us, though, like the disciples on the road, we don't always recognize him, and when we think that we journey alone.

Jesus is with us here in this church, in this worship service this morning. He is with us as we gather around this table. In fact, he is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

We open our hearts to him. We invite him into our lives: into those parts of our lives that are weak and in need of strengthening, that are broken and in need of healing, that are dark and in need of enlightenment. As we commune with him we empower him to form us spiritually.

The two disciples, to their surprise, discover Jesus on the road, though it is probably more correct to say that they rediscover him. There were times in the past when they felt his presence. However, because of his death they feel like they lost him. Like the disciples, we need to continually discover or rediscover our Lord. We need to rediscover him within ourselves, in other people, and in our church. We need to rediscover him in our worship. When our eyes are opened by the Holy Spirit, the Sacrament of Holy Communion is more than a service of remembrance; it becomes an experience of presence.

When the two disciples are in the presence of the risen Christ, he opens the scriptures to them. In his presence, the words of scripture come alive. They understand it, perhaps for the first time. They say to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” This can also happen to us. With the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we can discover or rediscover Jesus in scripture. Without this presence, this inspiration, the words of scripture are dead. Or they are nothing more than ancient history.

Note that the two disciples cannot hold onto Jesus. Just as they could not hold him in his human form, they cannot hold him in his spirit form. They recognize him in the breaking of the bread and immediately he “vanishes out of their sight.” They have the encounter, but it does not last forever. Like the Spirit that moves where it will, this experience comes and goes. We do not always feel his presence. Only the saints and mystics are constantly aware of his presence. But that’s ok. An occasional encounter with Jesus is more than enough!

This brief encounter is all the two men need to renew their faith. They were initially heading home, back to their old lives, back to their old ways. Now their hearts are aflame. That very night they return the seven miles to Jerusalem where they find the eleven gathered. They tell them what happened to them on the road to Emmaus, at the

table, and how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. This time the others believe!

Like the disciples in the Upper Room, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we gather together around this simple meal. We remember how Jesus told us that he would be present to us in the bread and in the cup. This is why we pray, in the words of our communion hymn:

*Be known to us in breaking bread,
But do not then depart;
Saviour, abide with us, and spread
Thy Table in our heart.*

Let us now be with our Lord as we both receive and share the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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