

BE KNOWN TO US IN BREAKING BREAD

(05/05/19)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:28-43

“When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.” (Luke 24:30-31)

This season, the Easter season, the seven Sundays between Easter and Pentecost, is an especially meaningful segment of the liturgical year. In our worship during these weeks we reflect on the ways that the disciples experienced the presence of their risen Lord and how this experience transformed them from disciples into apostles. The season culminates in Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church, the mystical body of Christ, the fellowship of faith and mission that has been charged with proclaiming the Gospel and with carrying on our Lord’s healing and prophetic ministry in the world.

This morning we are revisiting the passage of scripture that we read last Sunday. On Easter Sunday we read the account of Mary’s experience at the tomb. Last Sunday we focused on how the two disciples on the road to Emmaus traveled with Jesus but did not recognize him. Today we will consider the way that the disciples’ eyes were opened, how they experienced him in the breaking of the bread.

The account of Jesus and the two disciples as recorded in Luke differs from what we read in Mark. Mark, the first gospel to be written, describes Jesus’ encounter with his followers on the road to Emmaus in sparse or terse terms. In Mark 16:12-13 we read:

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.

Mark devotes two verses to the encounter; Luke takes twenty-three. Mark records no dialogue, while Luke relates a good deal of dialogue between Jesus and the men. In Mark, from the way it is written, it seems that the two men are members of the inner core of twelve disciples. In Luke, it is clear that the two men, Cleopas and an unnamed follower, are not of the original twelve. The two men, after their encounter with Jesus, return to where the “eleven were gathered together.” This indicates that they could not have been two of the original twelve disciples, now eleven after Judas’ death.

Note that both Mark and Luke relate the same kind of response to the testimony that Jesus has risen from the dead. In the passage from Mark, when the two men go back and tell “the rest” that Jesus appeared to them, the disciples do not believe them. In Luke we read that after their encounter with the angel at the tomb, Mary and the other women go and tell the disciples what they have learned. Luke says, “But these words seemed to them [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

We can’t really blame the disciples for not believing Mary and the two followers who met Jesus on the road. 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 Jesus’ appearance to the men who were walking into the country, he reappears to them in the presence of the eleven disciples as they sit at table. He upbraids the eleven for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they did not believe those who saw him after he had risen. Jesus is telling them (and us) that our faith and the quality or softness of our heart are major factors in whether we believe that he lives and whether we experience his presence.

According to both Mark and Luke there is another reason why Jesus’ followers do not recognize him. Mark says that Jesus “appeared in another form to two of them.” However, Mark doesn’t say what that form was.

I have no idea what Jesus looked like when he encountered Mary and the two disciples on the road. The most important question, however, is not how Mary and the disciples experienced their risen Lord, but how *we* experience him.

This is because the story of Jesus, though it is history, is much more than history. 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, too, need to die to our narcissistic egocentricity to be reborn in Christ. Just as he rose from the dead, we also 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 believed but not experiencing it, not allowing it to become a living reality in our lives.

The two men must have had some sense of what was going on because they “constrain” Jesus, imploring him to stay with them in Emmaus. They probably knew that

something special was happening, that this man was not an ordinary man, but they couldn't quite put it all together. They try to hold onto him until they figure it out. We have to give them credit for that.

When Jesus is at table with them, "he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

We, too, can experience our Lord in the breaking of the bread. This is because the risen Christ is eternal, is not limited to time and space. The risen Christ is also not limited to any particular form, e.g., to his human form. Jesus is present to us not only in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, but whenever we break bread. He is with us in our faith journey as a Christian community and in all our journeys. He travels with us, though like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we think we are traveling alone.

Jesus is with us here this morning. He is with us as we gather around this table. He is actually closer to us than we are to ourselves. Our prayer, especially the kind of prayer we practice on communion Sundays, an open and honest dialogue with our Lord, is a recognition of and a response to his presence. As we open our hearts to him in prayer, we invite him into our lives, especially 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 deepen our relationship with him, we empower him to form us spiritually, to call us forth into true Christian discipleship.

The two disciples, much to their surprise, discover Jesus on the road to Emmaus. It is probably more correct to say that they rediscover him. There were times in the past, times that they traveled with him, when they experienced his presence. When he died, they believed they had lost him; they felt cut off from his presence. Like these two disciples, we need to continually discover or rediscover our Lord. We need to rediscover him within ourselves, in other people, in our relationships, and in our church. We need to rediscover him in our worship. When we do this, the Sacrament of Holy Communion will no longer be a service of remembrance; it will be a sacrament of presence.

When the two disciples were in the presence of the risen Christ, he opened the scriptures to them. He explained to them what it meant. In his presence, the words of scripture came alive to them. They understood it, perhaps for the first time. They said 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, this fire within us, the words of scripture would be dead.

The two disciples discover that they cannot hold onto Jesus. Just as they could not hold him in his human form, so also 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. They experience their risen Lord, but they cannot contain him.

Like the Spirit that moves where it will, this experience of our Lord 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. We don’t need to be greedy. 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. 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 eleven disciples in the Upper Room, like the two other 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.*

Abide with us and spread your table in our heart. Let us now open our hearts to the presence of our risen Lord in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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May 5, 2019*