

Meeting Jesus

Sermon by Joseph Easley 7-7-19 @ Eastminster Presbyterian Church

Text: Luke 24:13-

35

We don't often think about it, but clearly Jesus had a larger group of followers beyond "the 12". Logic suggests that, and the Gospels confirm it. Luke mentioned in chapter 8: "several women who traveled with him"; and in Ch. 10: "70" whom he sent out to preach & heal. So, these 2 on the road that afternoon were part of that larger group who followed Jesus—most of them unnamed. Cleopas is named here, but he is mentioned nowhere else.

The opening phrase "That same day" refers to 2 days after the most devastating day possible for anyone who loved and trusted Jesus. As Cleopas said, "We had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel"—the one to fulfill the ancient promises of "God's Anointed"; the one to restore an independent Jewish nation and establish justice and peace on the earth.

Jesus had shown all the signs that he was the one: He was clearly a prophet in the tradition of Elijah, Jeremiah, etc. He spoke powerful words and did amazing things, so that all the people took notice. But the chief priests & others in positions of power were threatened, so they had him arrested and handed over to the Romans for him to be executed.

These two had seen it all and were in shock and deep grief. They were so much lost in their own sadness that they did not even notice another traveler, until he was beside them and asked: "What are these words that you have been pitching back and forth to each other?" (That is how the Greek could be translated literally: "words pitched back and forth between them." We've all experienced that: rehashing with a friend something so disturbing that we can't just put away, and we keep "pitching words" about it between us.)

They stood still in the road looking at him, stunned that anyone in Jerusalem, even a visitor for the Passover, had not heard all about this: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know about these things?" they asked. "What things?" he replied—playing dumb, in order to let them tell their story.

Then Cleopas began the litany of their hopes about Jesus and their crushing disappointment at his arrest and crucifixion. He ended by bringing the events up to date:

“It is now the 3rd day since all of this, and early today some of our women went to the tomb. They came back saying his body wasn’t there, and that they had seen angels who told them he was alive. Some of our men went to see, and they did find the tomb like the women said, but him they did not find.”

For them an empty tomb and a vision seen only by women were not enough to make a difference. The only thing that could change anything was to see him again. The irony was: Sorrow so locked them in despair, they could not see him, even as he stood before them.

Now the journey started again: This time with 3 of them walking. The stranger joined them and began to instruct them on “How it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer just as he did and through that to come into his glory.” “All the prophets pointed towards this”, he said—although in truth no one had read the prophets that way before Easter—It was Jesus himself who began that new interpretive process.

The unrecognized stranger in their midst, began to go through the Torah and Prophets—point by point to show how the very thing that happened was God’s plan all along. They heard his words—and appreciated them—although it did not yet add up to anything for them.

After a long walk and talk they arrived at their destination, Emmaus. The stranger who had so impressed them seemed to be going further, but it was late, and they urged him to stay with them. So he joined them for the evening. When they sat down for supper, their guest did exactly what Jesus had done 3 nights earlier: He took the bread, blessed it, broke the loaf, and gave it to them to eat—as he had done months earlier on the hillside in Galilee to feed over 5,000 people—as he had done at the Passover meal only 3 nights earlier (but it seemed long ago, in light of everything since).

Yet, in that very moment, when he took, blessed, broke & gave the bread, the loaf became for them exactly what Jesus had said of it 3 nights ago: “His body broken for them & given to them.” In that gift of bread they took in Christ & recognized him as the giver: The stranger/guest-turned-

host at the table was in fact Jesus, their Lord, alive and present to them in the bread and the cup they shared.

Their whole perspective changed in that moment! After he was gone they began talking again, but this time it was not the sad litany of crushed hope that had them lost in words on the road; now it was the excited talk of amazement and exhilaration—what we could call “Easter talk”—about a living Lord.

Then, knowing that he had been with them the previous few hours, and looking back, they were able to recall the warming of their hearts that had begun to take place on the road, as he opened to them their Bible in a new way. They had been prepared to see him by the expounding of scripture, and they actually saw him in the bread he gave them: That bread was his very life, given for them—and to them. It also gave them back their lives—lives that were new as well in the light of his continuing presence.

They were so alive and stirred that they got up and walked back to Jerusalem, although night was falling, and you can bet the trip back did not take nearly as long as the trip there! They found the other disciples, likewise lively again and sharing how Jesus was indeed alive and had appeared to Simon. They recounted their story on the road with him and how “he had made himself known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

But this was not just “to them”, nor is this just a tale from the past! This is our story and the church’s story: Every time we join in worship around the bread and the cup: Jesus is present again to us & when we take these, we receive him. The eyes of our hearts are opened to see what the eyes of the 2 disciples could not see on the road—even when he stood right before them. In fact, we are not less than those followers of Jesus who saw him in the flesh, because, like them, we really can see him in the gift of bread shared. And our hearts burn with faith when scripture is opened in such a way that we see the way God is still at work in our world and—despite all the headlines screaming the opposite—God is still bringing God’s Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.

This is why we gather for worship this day and why Christians have gathered every 1st day of the week for nearly 2,000 years: We gather in

worship on “the Lord’s day” to see Christ again and for our lives to be transformed by his presence. We gather around the very things those 2 shared with Jesus that day: The Word of Scripture & The Bread of Heaven.

Christian worship in its first several centuries centered on two things: The scriptures were read, interpreted, and applied to the worshippers place and time; and bread & wine were shared in remembrance of Jesus’ last supper, as he had instructed to them to continue doing as often as they gathered.

While Christian worship has always included other things as well—especially prayer, singing and an offering—the Word (read and interpreted) & the table have always been the central foci.

In the Western Church after the Reformation, a clear split developed in these. In the Roman Catholic Church the Mass had become so revered & elaborate that the role of scripture & preaching declined in importance, because they thought people received Christ directly through communion, sermons lost significance and were sometimes omitted entirely.

In counter to this neglect the Reformation helped to recover the importance of the Bible for teaching in the church, and Protestant Churches have put great stress on preaching the Word of Scripture. But since preaching was paramount & the people received God’s message through the Bible, in turn: symbolism & ritual had less status—“*could even be confusing*”—sacraments were given less importance, and communion became less frequent in most denominations. With less frequency, it also became less central to people’s experience—and less understood and so less valued. It was simply something done in memory of the last supper—occasionally, maybe just quarterly or at most monthly.

But over the past 56 years wonderful things have happened in the Western Church, which have affected much of American Christianity. First, Pope John 23rd called a church council that convened in 1962 and continue through 1965. Among many reforms to the Catholic Church from this was: A renewed emphasis on scripture and preaching, so

Catholics began to recover the importance of Word, without losing the centrality of Table.

Second, Protestant observers were included in the Second Vatican Council, and greater openness developed between these 2 branches of Christianity. In part because of Vatican II, a worship renewal movement began among Protestants. Scholars & worship leaders sought to recover the deeper tradition from the early church. One element of this was a recovery of the importance of sacraments, and communion in particular, so gradually since the late 1960's the focus on the Table has grown and its frequency increased without losing the corresponding value of the scripture & sermon. So once again worship for most of us has come back more to the dual focus that Christianity began with: Word & Table.

But note neither of these are ends in themselves. We don't just preach so people can learn more about the Bible and Jesus. Nor do we simply do communion "in remembrance of him." Rather both the Word and the Table are means to allow us to experience Jesus! This is what transformed the lives of the 2 disciples on the Emmaus road. Encounter is where the real transformation comes about! This is after all the point of all our spiritual practices (including prayer, small groups, etc.): to make contact with God.

So I hope in this message—and every sermon—you do not just hear the preacher, but that you are also encountered in a new way by the Christ, and that impacts your life.

I also pray that when you receive communion, it is not just eating bread and drinking grape juice, but as you hear the words "The body and blood of Christ", you realize you are receiving Christ today, God is entering your life anew in a tangible way.

Christ was not just present 2,000 years ago in the short earthly life of Jesus, but the Divine is present in all of life now! We are awakened to that every time we truly let the Bible speak to us and receive his body and blood given for and to us.

Amen! May it be true for us! This day and always!