



“Did Our Hearts Not Burn?”

a sermon by

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In the gospel of Luke, on the morning of the resurrection, two angels appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary outside of the empty tomb and commissioned them to share the good news of Jesus' resurrection to the disciples. The Mary's do run and tell them the good news, but none of the disciples believed them, including Peter, though he went and saw the empty tomb himself. Our lesson comes to us from the gospel of Luke chapter 24, verses 13-35- it is the very next scene in the scripture, that takes place later that same afternoon.

“Now on that same day two of the disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. 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; and he vanished from their sight. 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?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

It is not that Jesus was just going to leave them at the village alone that night. It was a custom of the region and a gesture of social sophistication for him to act as though he were going to go along his way and retire from the company of the disciples for the evening. Of course, he wasn't going anywhere else. The idea was that any traveler who met up with a group would not impose upon them to extend to them hospitality as hosts, but would rather wait until an invitation was offered. After breaking all the rules by defying physical and religious laws with his resurrection from the dead, Jesus is still playing by the rules of custom when he enters into the village with his disciples and acts as though they would go their separate ways at the fork in the road. Son of God risen from the dead and Jesus is still not in the habit of imposing himself on

others. Up to the point of their invitation to Jesus, the disciples, of course, still had no idea who it was that they were speaking with. The history of greeting divine guests unexpectedly (or entertaining angels unawares as they say) reaches far back into the memory of the Old Testament and into the extra-canonical literature of the Apocrypha. Take Abraham and Sara for example, who encounter three men who end up being messengers from God to tell Abraham that his elderly wife will bear a child. Or Moses, who was actually speaking with the great I Am when he thought he was simply chatting it up with a fiery and particularly verbose bit of shrubbery. Who knew? The case is similar in the scriptures as it is in Greek dramas- when, for dramatic effect, the identity of the main character is imperceptible to those around them until the perfect moment when the revelation of their true self is likely to have the greatest impact upon the situation. Perhaps when the moment is most ripe for transformation to take place.

The time for the disciples was certainly right. Dejected and in despair over the events of the past few days, the disciples hung their heads low and shuffled their feet when telling this stranger the story of Jesus. ‘We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel, but now three days have passed and.... I don’t know. Maybe we just had it all wrong.’ But it is this stranger then who sets them straight. ‘Aren’t these the very things that the Messiah must go through?’ Jesus asks. And unfolds the meaning of the scriptures to them as he had so many times before. It was only in retrospect that the disciples would recognize the significance of that strange feeling they had had when he was speaking, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” And so at the right time, Jesus casually and undoubtedly graciously accepts their offer to share a meal. The time was right. And seated at the table together as they had so many times before, in the now comfortable presence of the stranger, that familiar ritual of Jesus- the taking of bread, blessing, breaking, and giving it to them- becomes the transforming moment. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

Aristotle is quoted as saying, “Recognition may be based on visible signs, memory, or reasoning, but the best kind is that which arises from the actions alone.”¹ The revelation of recognition did not come from reasoning or sound arguments or proof beyond doubt, it came from a simple act repeated at an average meal, with nothing extraordinary about the company at the table except for the presence of Christ in their midst. The disciples had perhaps anticipated Jesus exalted among the heavenly hosts or wrapped in his funerary shroud, but they had certainly not intended to encounter the living God at their kitchen table. But in that space is the great wonder and beauty of the faith. That you do not have to be among the two outside the tomb that Easter morning to experience the resurrected Christ and his transforming power in your life. You do not have to see his face to recognize him. You do not even have to know that it is he who is walking and talking beside you. You simply have to come to the table and know that he will meet you there. And he will feed you. Not just quarterly. Not once a month. But each and every day for Christ says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if those who hear my voice open the door, then I will come in to them and eat with them, and they with me.” In the meal Christ makes himself present to the disciples and to us- indeed, to his disciples in every place and time. What else would we be doing here? It is a powerful act of communal memory and experience of the

¹(Aristotle Poetics 1452a, 1454b-55a, in D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, eds., *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.

living Christ in our midst. Which is why it is a celebration that bears repeating.

When I shared a story that I had heard from renowned preacher Tom Long a couple of weeks ago, one among your Wednesday Worshiper ranks shared with me another story he had once heard Tom tell. As the story goes more or less, in Tom's words, there was a man who came from a Presbyterian Church where they celebrated the sacrament quarterly. The man moved to a different town, where closest church to his home was a Congregationalist church that he began to attend, and that celebrated the Lord's supper weekly. As Tom tells it, the man was speaking on the phone with his old minister one day, complaining that the weekly celebration of the sacrament had started to infiltrate the rest of his life. He begrudged, I can't hardly sit down to dinner any more without thinking of Christ's body when I break my bread and dip it in olive oil, or his blood when I enjoy a glass of wine. And somewhere up in heaven, St. Peter went "Yes!"

Every meal we eat can become a sacred occasion when we realize it is Christ who sits at our table. This is why we are driven back to this meal time and again. To recall that Christ is indeed the resurrected and living God- alive and well and in the average stuff of life waiting for our invitation, for he will never impose himself. Ready to reveal himself and speak to us so that we too might know the joy of those whose hearts burn within them. Hopeful that we will not just seek him out at the Thanksgiving feast but in the daily bread as well. Ready to challenge us with the implicit commission to go out and share the good news of his resurrection by inviting a stranger to join you for a meal, whether or not you dine with them, sharing your life in a conversation and looking for God in the events of the day. In offering them spiritual food that their hearts may burn within them. That their eyes may be opened to Christ within you in your hospitality. That they may come to recognize him. That they may come to recognize him and his transforming power in their lives.

God does not impose himself but beckons us to extend an invitation and so let us look again for him at the table, and pray again that the doors of our hearts stand open so that Christ may continually come in to us and eat with us, and us with him. Let us be mindful that we watch for Christ when our hearts burn within us even when we speak with strangers. For in so doing people have entertained even the resurrected Christ unawares. Let us come to this table seeking transformation that we may leave this table changed and bear witness to others of the transforming reality that will cause their lives never to be the same again. The reality that the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.