

Didn't Our Hearts Burn

Luke 24

I've read a long passage so I hope to preach a short sermon. We'll see. I've read this much from Luke's gospel because in my 21 years here you and I have stood before the open grave and we've walked the miles between Jerusalem and Emmaus a number of times and so this year I wanted to let Luke's story speak for itself and just note a few features that caught my attention this reading through. Although, to be sure, some things bear repeating year after year.

It is the women in Jesus' entourage who are the first to shake off the shock and grief of Jesus' violent death and quick burial and organize an expedition to the tomb to love and honor their Rabbi in death as they had in life. So the prominence women are given before, during and after Jesus' crucifixion in John's gospel is also reflected here in Luke and in Matthew and Mark as well. They are the first to seek Jesus, at dawn on the first day, the earliest moment that anyone could decently have expressed devotion to Jesus. They are the first to see the stone rolled away and the empty grave and the angels announcing his resurrection, just as they had his birth some 30 years before.

The women were first and I think it has something to do with Christ being the bridegroom sent by his Father to woo and win us all as his bride. In other words, it's not about them being female and more spiritually aware and devoted. It is about the women offering and receiving love from Christ the way all of us together will offer and receive love from Christ here while we serve him together as the church and even more in the life we'll share with him forever after his return and our resurrection.

In any case, as that first resurrection Sunday wound on, the men begin to find themselves caught up in the same supernatural swirl that engulfed the women in the early twilight. Here in Luke, two disciples of Jesus decided to leave the anxiety and confusion of the Upper Room to head for a village a good solid day's walk from the city, Lord knows why. All they can talk about is what became of Jesus and before they get very far, the risen Christ overtakes them on the highway, strangely unrecognized. So Jesus asked as any stranger would, what in the world had them talking so intensely.

The two men stopped in their tracks, their faces a map of confusion and grief. One of them, Cleopas, wondered out loud how the stranger could have been at Passover and not known that three men were executed on a hill outside the city and that one of them, Jesus, was a great prophet who was the object of a great conspiracy involving priests and scribes and the temple police and the Roman governor and the Roman garrison. All official Israel had turned on Christ, but Cleopas and his companion had hoped that Jesus would redeem Israel from all that was bent and wrong.

Then came the wild tale of the women, an open tomb and an empty grave and angels in the dawn twilight speaking of life and motion and a future entirely beyond human understanding. But the disciples who investigated their story found everything as the women had said except for a living Jesus, “...*him they did not see.*”, Cleopas said, the grief returning to his face. At which point, Jesus can’t endure any more of this sad story. “*O you fools, and slow of heart to believe the words of the prophets! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into his glory?*”

And then Luke tells us that “...*beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*” So all afternoon, all seven miles Jesus spent, teaching these poor devout souls that what they had experienced the Friday before was not the dashing of all their hopes and dreams. And Cleopas and his friend had begun to get a glimmer, were just beginning to dare to hope when all of a sudden they found themselves at the turnoff to Emmaus.

The stranger began to move on when they begged him to spend the night, pointed out to him the daylight was fading and night would fall and, besides, he seemed to know things that made life look entirely different than that morning when they were in swirling, weeping Upper Room back in the city. And we’ve read the story many times before, Jesus breaks the bread and all of a sudden the blinders come off and they see him for who he is and then...he was gone!

The fact that they bolt up that moment and hit the road in the dark straight back to the city, storming the stairs into the Upper Room, that tells us all we need to know about how thunder-struck they were about what they had heard and seen from Jesus that day. And when they to the Upper Room they can’t even get their story out, because the Eleven and all the rest are also thunderstruck. “*Jesus is risen indeed and has appeared to Simon!*” And they no sooner get to sharing stories, but Jesus is standing there with them, probably nodding and smiling along till one of them sees him!

Then all pandemonium breaks out and Jesus has to rope them in, “*Peace!*” he tells them, “*Why afraid? Why upset? Why doubts? Look, my hands and feet! Touch me and see that I’m no ghost, nothing bad!*” And then in one of the great segues of all time, “*Is there anything to eat here?*” Because you people have no idea how hungry a resurrection makes you!

The point being that the risen Jesus does have “*flesh and bones*” just like he said. The point is that the resurrection isn’t about visions and spirits and far away places and altered reality. The resurrection is about you and me and the whole world around us being restored and then fulfilled, glorified when Christ returns, into what we and the world were always meant to be. Not anything sterile and strange and otherworldly, but a rich, real life filled with laughter and banquets and singing and sharing.

Well, like I’ve said, if you come to church, we’ve all been on this road to Emmaus many times, we’ve all been in this Upper Room before, we’ve all smiled at the thought of the Lord Jesus

tucking into a piece of broiled fish after a busy day of hiking and talking and amazing his friends. The story is full of details that ought to lift our hearts and light up our imaginations. But I'd like to settle on this, what Cleopas and his friend said to each other when the Lord Jesus left them holding the bread and wondering what happened. They said, "*Didn't our hearts burn while he talked to us on the road, while he opened the Scriptures to us?*"

Think for a moment how many times as Luke's resurrection story winds on does Jesus talk about what is written, "*...the Law of Moses, the words of the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me*", he says. And it always strikes home for me, because with the advent of modern media, we work so hard, we are under such constant pressure to set peoples' hearts aflame, to amaze people with how real and good and powerful is church. But we are tempted to do it without the one feature that Jesus turned to even when he was in his resurrection glory that first day out the grave. All day, all Jesus could talk about was the written word of God.

It was Scripture as much as the sight and sound of Jesus himself that helped his disciples take the resurrection to heart. The point being that sight and sound and warmth and personal appeal all have their place. But our hearts really open, our minds are really prepared to grasp the love and truth and power of God only to the extent that each of us has some sort of experience and background in the word of God. In my case, the ground was broken at my mother's side at Mass on Sunday where the whole service was in Latin except for the three readings from the word of God, the Prophets, the Gospel and the New Testament letter were all in English

It was all I was going to understand on a Sunday, so I listened. And years later, when I happened to catch Billy Graham on TV, I knew what he was talking about because I had already heard the word of God as a boy in church. And years later, as a teenager, when I had all but been swept away from God, I picked up a paperback New Testament and my heart started to burn at what I read because what I'd learned as a boy in church and from my family and from Billy Graham on TV all wove together so that life began to make sense when I read the words of Jesus in my paperback Bible. It was then that a friend of mine in high school told me that God was real and what I'd learned as a boy was true and it was possible to start to live it.

And that day I was willing to try because of all the years I'd heard and read and learned the word of God from family at home, at church, from strangers on TV and from friends God sent my way. The point being that faith in Christ is not something that can be manipulated in a moment in anyone's heart through theatrics and ambiance and technique and programming. Because the doorway to our hearts is through our minds. We can only love and want what we trust and understand. It follows that we can only love and want and follow Christ, to the extent we learn to know and trust him from the written word of God.

Because what we learn from Scripture, the stories and truths from our Bibles that get written into our heart through the years, those are the things that allow our hearts to burn when God comes calling. So if we're looking for an experience with God that is real and powerful and lasting, we need to understand that part and parcel with wanting and loving and knowing Christ is wanting

and learning and having Scripture as part of our daily lives. Because love for Christ and learning the word of God go together. And that is the truth that Jesus lived and breathed and taught the entire first day he was out the grave.