

*Sermon May 7/8, 2011, The Rev. Jan O'Neil, St. Timothy's Episcopal Church; Revised Common Lectionary 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter; Gospel of Luke 24:13-35*

You just heard the gospel story that is a favorite of many: *The Road to Emmaus* from Luke. Two friends grieving, go on a seven mile walk, perhaps to get a way from it all, have time to talk; seven-miles-worth-of-sharing the events around the violent death of Jesus, their teacher and hoped for Messiah...And their disappointment that he has not returned by the third day. A third wanderer joins the two for more conversation—the friends listen to his story, but don't recognize this man. Eventually arriving at their destination—Emmaus; they invite the stranger in for a meal and shelter for the night and while sharing bread together their lives break open: they are energized, inspired. Their guest disappears and Cleopas and companion return to Jerusalem filled with joy. The Easter story comes alive with the gift of time. The stranger is Jesus who has been with them all along on the journey: truth breaks open in the breaking of the bread.

What might such an encounter be like for us in St. Louis today? Use your imagination. Say we are at St. Timothy's, you and I. Perhaps we have been sharing a sadness going on in our lives. Right now there is no more to say. We get antsy; we need to get a way, escape. Let's grab a bite to eat at Frontenac Plaza—I pick Frontenac logistically because Google confirms it is really seven miles from here. Should we walk?? Any volunteers? No, probably not, we don't have time: rather we jump in a car for the seven-plus minute ride. Turning on some music, I grab my cell, you grab yours—text a friend to fill them in and then we jump out of the car, we hurry to find a table where we can have a meal together...Can we in that moment bring together our broken lives, our disappointments, our hopes? Can this meal, a simple daily encounter, become a eucharist of sorts; eucharist spelled with a small “e”, a meal of companions (literally, sharing bread) in the spirit of Christ **or** is everything lost in the rush?

We have a challenge today, don't we? **To** take the **slow** walk to Emmaus, to absorb the amazing story of how Jesus' spirit is with us on our journeys, how God is with us in the

hospitality of our hearts, how Christ is with us with abundance and power when we break bread together.

Luke, I believe, writes down this story of Jesus joining two disciples on the road, because when he was writing 50 or so years after the crucifixion, few people were still alive that had met the fleshy, living, historical Jesus. As we heard in the Gospel of John last week “Blessed are those who have not seen, but still believe,” which becomes the new challenge of “the church” to be empowered by the spirit of Christ that lives “forever” rather than by those who knew Jesus face-to-face. Luke makes Jesus’ presence alive and real to the people of his times. Whether **for you** the post crucifixion appearances of Jesus we have heard over the past few weeks--to Mary at the tomb, to doubting Thomas, to all the disciples, to Cleopas here-- reveal actual physical presence **or** spiritual presence is not my point. Rather, the truth is that **either way—physical or spiritual--** the power of Christ is with us always if we can listen and be the community. We **are** the risen body of Christ and that we are alive 2000 years later says it all.

So what Luke wrote toward the end of the first century remains the truth for the church today. Blessed are those who have not seen, yet follow Jesus. It is the presence of the spirit of Christ that sustains us, in the Word, in the Eucharist and in the small “e” eucharists when we reach out in compassion to see the face of Christ in each person and to nourish and feed others in the spirit of Christ. We relish these accounts because we live in the present.

Luke’s story of Emmaus, perhaps more than other post resurrection accounts, offers unique opportunities for us to put ourselves in the story on the journey with Cleopas— How? First Cleopas is a disciple, but an **unfamiliar** one—we hear of him only this once **and** his companion is unnamed—we don’t know if it is a man or a woman. So we can slip ourselves into the story as ordinary disciples with failures just trying to walk the Way. In addition, Jesus joins us on our journey, but how often we don’t get it, don’t recognize him. Isn’t that true of us? Upon hearing this reading, I almost want to shake Cleopas, “Don’t you get that this is Jesus?”, but then realize that I am the one who needs

shaking up. We miss that our relationships are key to this story. But Cleopas and friend teach us how. They travel a long seven miles with this stranger; they stick with the journey to Emmaus, leading right into their home.

Here's the twist. What is this hospitality that disciples practice and we are asked to repeat? Cleopas and companion urge "Jesus" strongly to stay with them before going on; it will soon be dark and the disciples know that it is not safe for this man to go it alone on the lonely dirt road. They offer **radical** hospitality of taking a stranger into their home-- not without major risks for them. So the unrecognized Jesus now accepts the hospitality, the open door, and joins them at the table. They feed Jesus and then we hear the words of Jesus summarized, that remind us of his many feedings and echo the Eucharist, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." It is in this act of the gut and heart offered in response to active hospitality that the two disciples have their eyes opened and they recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread, being true companions, and in this transformation Jesus vanishes from their sight. There is a graphic black and white painting by Donnell capturing this with the two disciples' arms raised...Aha! "Jesus is right here and we don't even know it."

In Spanish & French there are two verbs for to know— in Spanish: saber & conocer. Saber is in the head...like knowing the history since Moses—conocer is to know intimately in the heart. It is in the relationship of the heart & gut that the two disciples finally know Jesus at the table.

The power of this story is that we are all invited to be a part of it—to know Jesus in the community that kneels at the communion rail together, bringing our own broken bodies for the breaking of the bread, begging for God's hospitality, the sharing at the table to transform us—so that we too can leave the table, ready to be back on the move—as these two disciples returned quickly to Jerusalem changed and filled with spirit breaking forth from the bread and their hospitality of welcoming the stranger into their home. It is the Eucharist and Jesus being present with us that can empower us to go into the world and to welcome the stranger, to offer bread to the hungry.

So of course, we at St. Tim's are a Eucharistic community. We gather each week as the **body** of Christ and we are offered the **body** and blood of Christ, and then we can go into the world rejoicing in the power of the spirit in Christ's name, in the Christ that teaches us to care for others in the best tradition of being mother—to offer hospitality in our broken, aching world, to set and join a table greater than our own...to share our hearts, our space—our home.

Today in the present tense how can I be resurrected? How can I be opened up by the Eucharist? How can you? How can we? How can we walk with Jesus on the road, knowing that he must “leave,” “vanish,” turning the world over to us to care for the tornado and flood victims; support struggling families through Kiva microfinancing; plant potatoes & tomatoes and fill the food baskets with staples to share with Trinity, Peace meal, Circle of Concern; support UTO; take stands against racism; help build a home for Habitat; support safe childbirth in Sudan; support Stray Rescue; boil eggs; tutor at Sigel; etcetera..... We don't respond out of duty; rather reaching out flows naturally from who we are as transformed people. Jesus vanishes yet is always with us so we can see the face of Christ in each person on the Way. This is radical hospitality and breaking open the bread and the breaking open of ourselves.

Today, be fed at God's table; be joined in this place.....for the sake of the world.

Go in Peace.

Thanks be to God.