

Easter Sunday
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Meeting the Risen Christ Today

a sermon on Luke 24.12-35

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Easter sermons ought to come with a warning label. I once heard an Easter sermon by a pastor who did not believe Jesus rose from the dead. He believed that whatever happened to get Christianity started happened only in the minds of the disciples, as if, faced with the cross and the ruin of all their dreams, they simply decided to keep on hoping, even without a reason. More disturbing than his lack of faith was his subtlety. He talked about resurrection hope, and you had to pay close attention to figure out he was not preaching Christ risen and alive. I knew another pastor who said he believed in the resurrection, but he claimed it was not an event in history. According to him, Jesus' body rotted in the grave, but that did not matter one bit. If you ask me, believing in a resurrection that you don't believe actually happened is a lot harder than believing what the gospel writers have to say.

That's why every Easter sermon ought to begin with a clear disclaimer right up front. When the preacher says "resurrection" what does it mean? And does the preacher believe it or not? I can't force every preacher to speak clearly, but I can do so myself. When I say "resurrection," I mean what the New Testament writers meant and what Christianity has always taught: That Jesus of Nazareth was killed by crucifixion, buried, and on the third day God raised him bodily from the dead. He was the same person as before, and he had the same body as before, but his body was transformed and glorified. This happened in history, at a specific time and place. People saw him, touched him, ate with him, and worshiped him. He ascended into heaven and he lives and reigns today and forever. That's what resurrection means, and that is what I believe.

Call me crazy if you want to – at least I believe what I preach and what the Christian church has always preached since the days of the apostles. God raised Jesus from the dead. If you think that's crazy ... well, that's just the beginning. It gets better. If God raised Jesus from the dead, then Jesus is alive. Because Jesus lives, we can know him today. And when I say we can know him, I mean personally, not just know about him.

I read about a scholar who specializes in Abraham Lincoln. This guy has studied Lincoln, his time period, his writings. He's latched on to every fact about Lincoln he can get his hands on. He has spent so much time absorbed in all things Lincoln that he

feels he knows Lincoln. Of course he doesn't. Rather it is *as if* he knows Lincoln. That is exactly what I do *not* mean when I say we can know Jesus today. I suppose it might be possible to know Jesus in that way, but it would be a tragedy to only know *about* Jesus when you could easily know Jesus himself. Lincoln is dead. Jesus is alive. You can know him.

"OK," you answer, "I'm interested. You say Jesus is alive and we can know him. How? What exactly does that look like?" I'm glad asked. Our scripture reading points us in the direction we need to go.

Luke describes for us the confusion and excitement of the first Easter as the disciples tried to figure out what in the world was going on. The day started with the shock of an empty tomb, rumors of angels, and women no one would listen to. Through the course of the day, more odd things happened. More pieces fell into place. By evening, sorrow and confusion had given way to faith and joy.

In our reading, two disciples were walking to Emmaus. Only one is named, Cleopas. If this is the same Cleopas mentioned in John 19.25, his wife's name was Mary, and she was probably the other person with him. As they walked, Jesus met them on the road. Why they did not recognize him is a mystery. Other resurrection accounts tell how someone did not recognize Jesus right away. Mary Magdalene initially thought he might be the gardener. That was just a moment, though; these two take an exceptionally long time. I really can't explain it, but there it is. They didn't recognize him, and the three began talking. Cleopas and Mary told Jesus about his death and how it had dashed their hopes and of the bizarre rumors started by a handful of women who had been to the tomb and found it empty. Notice that they were not expecting the resurrection, nor were they prepared to believe it without convincing evidence.

I imagine Jesus laughing and teasing them when he said, "How foolish you are and how slow to believe what the prophets said! Was it not necessary that the Messiah suffer these things and only then enter his glory?" Luke tells us, "Then beginning with the Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." Wouldn't you have loved to be in on that conversation? Do you wonder what he told them? You would know if you had been here for our worship service on Good Friday. I don't have time to go into it now, but if you are interested, some printed copies of that sermon are available as you go out.

You heard the story read: They ended up at the table for dinner. Jesus was their guest, but he assumed the role of host. He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Suddenly their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Then he vanished from their sight. By the time they got back to Jerusalem to tell the others that Jesus is alive, word was already out. Jesus had appeared to Simon Peter also and the party was on.

Luke wrote this because it really happened, but he also told it in a certain way in order to show us how we too can know Jesus. Cleopas and Mary asked each other, after Jesus vanished, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” This is a clue we should follow. The scriptures allow us to know Jesus because we meet him there. It is not simply that when we read the Bible we learn information about Jesus. It is much more than that, something more real, powerful, and mysterious. The risen Jesus is in heaven at the Father’s right hand, but his Spirit – the Holy Spirit – is present and active in our world, even within us. When you read the Bible prayerfully, humbly, with expectation, you may just find more than words printed on paper. You might encounter the Living God himself, present through his Spirit, speaking to you.

Cleopas and Mary said their hearts “burned within them” as Jesus spoke to them. Have you ever felt that? I have. It is part excitement, as new understanding dawns in your mind. Your mind is like the sky at sunrise, gradually getting brighter and brighter. It is part awe, with just a pinch of terror thrown in, as you feel in your heart the presence of God. You have a sudden realization, “I am encountering the Living God right this moment. He has found me. He is here.” You sense you are living in a holy moment.

I admit it is an exceptional experience. It is not something that happens to me often. And yet I know exactly what they meant about the burning heart because I have felt it. If you have, good for you. If not, do not despair. God deals with us according to how we are made. He deals with us through our mind, our heart, even our bodies in some sense. So he speaks to us through both thoughts and emotions. But while our emotions are important, they are not everything, and they are not always reliable. God can be present as you read scripture, but you might not *feel* a thing. You have to trust his promises. He has promised to be with us. He has promised to lead us into truth. We know that the risen Jesus encounters us through the Bible, so we go there with the right attitude and trust he will. Make a habit of reading the Bible that way, and you will come to know him.

The more obvious clue in our scripture reading is the bread. Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. That points us to the Lord’s Table. Just as Christ meets us in scripture by his Holy Spirit, he meets us in the sacraments. The sacraments are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. He is present in our baptism. That, of course, happens only once. We meet him on an on-going basis through the Lord’s Supper. Presbyterians do not believe the bread and wine become the physical body and blood of Jesus, but we know that he is really present, spiritually. We like to say that we feed on him in our hearts by faith when we eat at his table.

And that was his intention. He gave us this Supper as a way to be with us and to make himself known to us. Jesus loved a good meal. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus

eating with people: sinners, Pharisees, his friends, his disciples. He used table fellowship as a way to advance his mission. Eating together was such a big part of the love Jesus shared with his disciples, he did not want it to end when he returned to the Father. So he gave us the Lord's Supper, so that he could go on eating with his disciples until he comes again.

We come to know the risen Jesus as we meet him in scripture and the sacraments. We should add to this list corporate worship and prayer. The idea is the same: Through his Holy Spirit, Jesus meets us when we pray and when we gather together to worship. He promised, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" [Mt 18.20].

You may object that we miss out on his physical presence. Unlike the first disciples, Thomas in particular, we do not get to see his risen body. We do not get to touch him. And that is true, but he thinks it is better this way. If he were here physically, he would be limited in time and space. As it is, he is not. Around the world today hundreds of millions of Christians are gathering to celebrate his resurrection, and he is there. He is present in the open-air, tin-roofed churches of the third world, in the secret house churches of China and North Korea, in grand cathedrals, in humble country churches and big city mega-churches. He is here with us, right now. He is alive. We can know him.

Easter is a joyful celebration. Jesus' resurrection means sin and death are defeated. The resurrection of his physical body is so important, because I have a body and so do you. We are physical beings who live in a physical world. If God lacked the power to raise Jesus' body, or if he didn't care enough about this physical world he made to redeem it, then where's the hope for us? God wants it all. God wants all of us – to save us body and soul. And he has. Christ is risen, so death is not the end. New creation has begun. His promise is that everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ will be raised to eternal life just as he was. His resurrection proves the promise is not too good to be true. God can do it. He has already done it for Jesus. He will do it for you too if only you believe in him.

I hope you see how Easter gives us hope not just for the future, when we die, but also for this moment and every moment we are alive. Knowing we have a future means life makes sense and has a purpose. What we do matters. Life is never empty or meaningless. Life is a good gift of God, and he wants us to enjoy it, and to love and enjoy God, forever.

Because of Easter you can go on doing what is right, working for peace, for justice, for the well-being of our community and world. So often it feels as your effort is wasted. Evil seems so powerful. Problems overwhelm our pitiful strength. But now you know the secret. You know the end. You know who wins in the end. So you have the

resilience to keep going. You are not going to give up, because you know that every good thing you do lasts into eternity. The bad will not.

The resurrection is such *good* news! It makes all the difference. Jesus is alive. He is here. You can know him today. You can live with him forever. You can join him in his on-going mission in the world. The resurrection means all of that, and therefore we need to celebrate!

I can't think of a better way to celebrate than to gather joyfully with our risen Lord at his table. One again, he takes the role of host. He invites you to eat and drink in faith. May your eyes be opened, and may he be made known to you in the breaking of the bread. Amen.

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