

Sunday, April 10, 2005
3rd Sunday of Easter
“Burning Hearts”

It was the afternoon of the first Easter. Earlier in the day, the women followers of Jesus had discovered that the tomb where Jesus’ body had been laid was empty. But it was now later in the day.

Two of the followers of Jesus were walking on the road to Emmaus. They were not two of the twelve disciples, actually there were only 11 left. The 11 disciples were still back in Jerusalem. These were two of the larger group of 60 or more who were also Jesus’ followers. One was somebody named Cleopas and the other was somebody else whose name is lost to history. These two were walking on the road to Emmaus, a town that was seven miles down the road from Jerusalem.

I want to suggest this morning that Cleopas and the other person whose name we don’t know are, in this story, meant to be a prototype of the post-resurrection church. This story is not just about two of Jesus’ extended community of disciples, it is about the post-resurrection church. They are us. We are them. What is true of them in this story is true of us today. This story is about you and me and the half-anonymous collection of humanity who have been the church these past two millennia.

Here’s what the story tells us about ourselves:

First: they were nonplused. They are scratching their heads and wondering what is happening.

They had thought they knew what God was up to in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. They had hoped that Jesus would redeem Israel, but it wasn’t happening the way they had expected. Jesus had died on a cross instead of becoming king, and now the women were saying strange things about an empty tomb. Something seemed to be happening. God seemed to be doing something, but they couldn’t figure out what it was. It certainly wasn’t what they had expected.

This is the normal condition of the post-resurrection church – we are intrigued, convinced that God is doing something, but we are not quite certain what it is.

This is the significance of the resurrection: what God is up to is outside the box of our human comprehension. What God is up to in human history continually exceeds our own hopes and surprises us. What God is up to in our own church continually exceeds our own hopes and expectations and surprises us. What God is up to in our lives exceeds our own ability to fully grasp it and surprises us.

Certainty is not a characteristic of the post-resurrection church of Jesus Christ. There is a sense of confidence and faith about certain things. God is doing something; all of this will

make sense further along when we know all about it. But if we think we have more than a glimpse of what God is doing, we are worshipping a God smaller than the God of the resurrected Jesus. The God of the resurrected Jesus is a God of surprises. If nothing has surprised us in our spiritual life, or in the life of our spiritual community, our church lately, maybe we should worry about whether we are living as a resurrection people.

If we are looking for a roadmap with every detail of the journey spelled out, the post-resurrection church doesn't have much of one to offer. The Bible is not a transcendental version of MapQuest. The post-resurrection church is more like a scavenger hunt: you find one clue and try to wander in the right direction until you find another clue, and another clue, and another.

One of the greatest failings of the church is our desire to live by knowledge rather than by faith. We want answers when what God invites us to do is to trust God on a journey that is beyond our limited understanding.

So, first of all, the post-resurrection church lives in a state of being nonplussed – in a state of awe and wonder and surprise. We live by faith not by sight. We are on a journey, and we do not know the way or destination, other than that Jesus' way is our way and that we will get home someday.

This same point is made in another way in this story. While Cleopas and the other whose name we do not know were walking on the road to Emmaus, the resurrected Jesus himself came near and began to walk with them, and they did not recognize him. This is the same truth. Jesus walks with the post-resurrected church, but we don't recognize him. Our image of what the resurrected Jesus should look like is too stereotyped. Jesus always comes to us as a stranger, a surprise. Jesus does not come to us in the form of the familiar or the nostalgic. Jesus always surprises us, and does not reinforce our stereotypes, biases and unimaginative platitudes. The resurrected Jesus always walks with us as a stranger.

The second truth about the post-resurrection church that we see in this story is this: what saves Cleopas and the other person whose name we don't know is that they choose openness and hospitality to the stranger over fear. The only saving grace of the post-resurrection church is hospitality and openness to the stranger. Otherwise they would have missed Jesus altogether.

I've been asking myself this week why Jesus appeared first here in the gospel of Luke to Cleopas whom we have never heard of before and never hear about again since and some other person whose name we never come to know at all? Why did the resurrected Jesus appear first in Luke to these two, forgive me, supposedly nobodies? Why wouldn't Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance be to the 11 remaining disciples who he had been closest to during his ministry?

Well, John tells us that the 11 disciples, back in Jerusalem, had locked themselves up in a closed room, huddled together, for fear of the religious authorities. (John 20: 19) The only saving grace of the post-resurrection church is when it manages to live with

hospitality and openness rather than to huddle together seeking safety and comfort because of its fear.

Along with a desire for surety and certainty, the other great danger for the post-resurrection church is that it will huddle and hide, scared of strangers and those who are different, and thereby keep the resurrected Jesus out of our midst.

We so often want the church to be a place that is comfortable, a place that is safe, no conflict, no discomfort. Then a stranger comes into our midst and makes us uncomfortable, so we shoo him or her away, without ever realizing it was the resurrected Jesus who was trying to walk with us.

For an instant, Cleopas and the other person whose name we don't know recognized Jesus during the breaking of bread. They had a momentary glimpse of Jesus. But as soon as they recognized Jesus, he disappeared again, because the resurrected Jesus never lets us get too comfortable, too cozy. As soon as we recognize him, he disappears and comes to us again as a stranger. That's what happens in this story in Luke.

Finally, notice this: after Jesus disappeared, Cleopas and the other said to each other: "Were our hearts not burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?" The resurrected Jesus is a Jesus of burning hearts. He discomforts us. He keeps us from becoming too sure of ourselves. He keeps us from becoming too self-satisfied.

My mother used to call the experience of the burning heart – the term she used, was being under conviction. It is the sense within us that we have somehow missed the full meaning and potential of what God wants for us. It is what keeps us from choosing safety over honesty. It is what keeps us growing.

I experienced this just this past Easter in a humbling and upsetting and challenging way. We had an Easter Sunrise service here at 7 a.m. this past Easter. I walk to church on Sunday mornings. It is an important part of preparing myself for worship to have those 50 minutes of walking from Capitol Hill to Foundry to think and pray and center myself and to give the Holy Spirit one last chance to fix my sermon.

Well, because we have a 7 a.m. Easter service, I walked to Foundry Easter morning sometime around 5 a.m. or so. As I was walking toward Thomas Circle, I noticed out of the corner of my eye two people standing there.

Even though I am usually deep in thought, I try to be friendly during my morning walks. I say hello to the man who sells newspapers on Mass. Ave and other people I run into regularly.

I notice two people just standing there near Thomas Circle out of the corner of my eye. I suddenly realized they were two women and that their skirts were very short. I quickly drew the conclusion, without ever looking at them straight on, that they were prostitutes, still out from working the circle the night before.

You know what I did? I walked past them like this (my head down and turned away, walking as fast as I could). I had a visceral reaction. They scared me. They scared me so much I was impolite and discourteous and, in a sense, demeaning to them.

Two blocks later, I stopped and said: “What is wrong with me? These were two human beings and I treated them like dirt.” I was scared of them. And you know that whenever we are scared of someone else, whenever someone else brings out strong feelings of dislike and anger within us, we are really reacting to something without ourselves that we have not faced.

I thought to myself, “Here I am, an old man who has still something within myself that I have not faced or worked through that makes me afraid of two prostitutes who are hardly more than children, so that I can not even nod to them or say hello or acknowledge their existence.” My heart burned within. I was under conviction. God was pushing me to continue to grow: to let love and acceptance conquer my fears.

I am going to work on it. I am going to talk to Jane, and to a spiritual guide, and to a psychiatrist until I come to the place of knowing and accepting my own self, so that I can go back out on the street in the middle of the night and say hello to those two children and give them a copy of “All Things Foundry” and invite them to church.

This is the saving grace of the post-resurrected church when we can choose hospitality and openness over fear. When we can believe the resurrection and let love conquer fear.