

## **“The Risen Stranger”**

Luke 24:1-35 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might recognize the burning in our hearts and open our eyes to see you. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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It's been interesting to come into the Easter season this year, having just made our way through a class on Gospel Comparisons. So often, when we get to this point in the liturgical calendar, we pull all the best parts from all the gospels to tell the story with maximum drama. It's an effective way of telling the story, but it can also blur the lines showing who said what. One thing that can happen when you start to look at the gospels individually is that you develop a favorite. Is that wrong? Probably it's just human. I will freely admit that my favorite Easter story for Easter morning is the one we used last week from John 20. But in general, Luke is my favorite gospel, and the passages we read today are probably my favorite for this day, the Second Sunday of Easter. It just seems wrong to go through the Easter season without telling the story of the Walk to Emmaus.

I guess it's good that Easter is a season, rather than just one day, so we can tell as many of the stories as we want. As much as I like John's rendition of Mary's solo visit to the garden, thinking Jesus was the gardener, I also love this version from Luke, where there are more women involved, but also that provocative question from the angels: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" It's an important question

for the church to address, in every season. It pushes us to consider that our tendency to value tradition over newness might be counter to the principles of the Resurrection.

Luke is also the only one to hint that Simon Peter had his own individual encounter with the Risen Christ before Jesus appeared to all of them. This is a fascinating omission really. Simon Peter is arguably one of the most important disciples; if he had an encounter with Jesus that day, why isn't it narrated in more detail? Instead what we have is all four gospels agreeing that it was the women who were the first to hear the news of the resurrection and be told to go and share it. Ironically, it was Peter who was later named the Bishop of Rome, and women have been told for centuries that they shouldn't even speak in church. Why is the good news of Easter so slow to sink in?

I think there might be a hint here in the passage we read from Luke. The story of the walk to Emmaus is hinted at in what's called "the longer ending of Mark," but in typical Mark fashion, there really aren't any details. Luke is more interested in effective storytelling, so we get the dialogue and lots of details, including what happened right after Jesus asked the two disciples on the road what they were talking about. "They stood still, looking sad."

These two, and the rest of their community, had just been through what was likely the worst trauma of their lives, even considering they were an oppressed people living in an occupied nation. No wonder their brains weren't firing on all cylinders;

that's not how humans work. Trauma and grief impair our faculties, slowing down our capacity to see the bigger picture or latch onto signs of hope. In this regard, we may have something in common with Cleopas and his friend, for we have been living through low-grade trauma for a couple years now. Some of us have experienced more acute trauma throughout that time or before. We cannot underestimate its impact on us. So it's important to give ourselves permission to take a moment to stand still and be sad.

But the story doesn't leave us there. The second provocative question of Luke's resurrection narrative come next. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" Such an interesting juxtaposition to "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" This identity confusion is another similarity across gospels, and I think it's something we need to pay attention to. The gospels are telling us that it's likely we will frequently look for Jesus in the wrong places and that we will often not recognize him when we do actually bump into him. What are we to make of that? We are Christians, people who have committed ourselves to following Jesus and proclaiming him Lord. We gather here, in the church he established, to celebrate his presence in our midst. And yet, our own scriptures are telling us to check ourselves, because we might be missing him. He may have taken the form of a stranger, waiting right there in front of us, to see if we're going to invite him in or not. Are we?

One might suspect that the story of the Walk to Emmaus is one of my favorite, because as a lifelong Disciple, I appreciate how it centers communion. That moment is clearly the dramatic climax of this story: “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them,” it says. “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.” He was “made known in the breaking of the bread.” But in this story, there was an important step that preceded the breaking of the bread. A stranger was offered hospitality – welcomed into the home so he didn’t have to continue his journey in the dark.

Sometimes I wonder how our traditions got formed the way they did and not in other ways that would have been equally biblical. You’ve heard me ruminate on how lucky we are that the Last Supper was codified as bread and wine, instead of bread and fish, which could have been just as likely. But here’s another interesting possibility: What if the early church had decided that our ritual meal couldn’t really qualify as The Lord’s Supper unless there was a stranger present? If we are seeking the presence of Christ in this meal, and if we are taking these Easter stories seriously, we might want to be more zealous about making sure we’re welcoming strangers to the table.

What would the church look like if we took this Easter lesson to heart? Who would be here with us that isn’t already? How many times would we have encountered the Risen Christ again? If “every morning is Easter morning,” that means there are strangers crossing our paths every day who might embody Jesus, if we

were to offer hospitality and bread for breaking. It means we must keep our eyes open and be alert to those moments when our hearts begin to burn within us. We may be sad; we may be slow; we may even be foolish in our exhaustion and stress. But we still have bread to share, and that is where Jesus has promised to meet us. Let us not fail to invite him to the table. Hallelujah and Amen!