

“After Emmaus...”

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Scripture

Luke 24:30-46

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him... That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet... Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones..." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"

They gave him a piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate in their presence... Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day... and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations... You are witnesses of these things.

Sermon

Last week I preached on the passage in Luke that precedes this one. Like this one it too is one of the “appearance” stories where Jesus appeared to his followers, following his resurrection. Now the two passages are part of the same story. Last week’s passage, you may recall, Jesus appeared, unrecognized, as he traveled along the road to Emmaus with two of his followers. As I mentioned they were in extreme despair, their hopes and dreams had been shattered by the arrest and murder of Jesus. I reflected upon just how painfully difficult their journey of only seven miles must have seemed to them.

Evidently, they were so certain of Jesus’ death and/or so wrapped up in their own guilt and/or despair that they could not recognize (or bring themselves to believe) who this stranger was, walking only inches away from them. Yet pain and despair did give way to a burning, energized hope as they sprinted back over that same seven mile path back to Jerusalem in only a fraction of the time.

I also reflected upon a number of “reasons” why they may have failed to recognize Jesus as well as “reasons” for their “sudden” clarity. My favorite of course was the mere act of Jesus taking, holding and breaking the bread for the simple meal that the three planned to share at the end of their long journey. The focus suddenly had transferred from their pain to the

nail scarred hands of the stranger. I have to wonder if along the way they had been tempted to say, "Wow you sure look and sound familiar." Or "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

But of course, they knew it couldn't have been him! He was, after all, dead and buried in a tomb! But noticing those hands would have removed all doubts! Seeing those hands reminded them not only of the horrible sacrifice but also the profound love that had led to such suffering. Seeing those hands also opened them up to the reality of the great power now available that can transcend all pain, despair, sorrow, and death!

And so, thusly transformed, they returned to Jerusalem to let the others know of all that they had experienced. But more surprises still await those who must find hope after Emmaus. So, this morning, I want to look at what happens after Emmaus.

No doubt weary from not only walking and then running 14 miles in one day, and likely out of breath, they declared to those others hiding in fear, "The Lord has risen indeed!" But as they begin to recount all that had happened on the road and at the great unveiling during supper, Jesus appeared! "Peace be with you!" A seemingly failed greeting meant to calm but insufficient, since they thought he was a ghost! This time, however, he quickly showed them not only his hands, but his feet as well, and encouraged them to reach out and touch him. "Go ahead, I ain't no ghost!" "See, there's nothing to be afraid of!" Then he gobbled down some broiled fish for added effect. And just like earlier in the day he also began to open their minds in order to pour in some truth!

Suffering, he reminded them, is not the problem, it is not the worst thing that can happen to someone, in fact it is inevitable for each of us in some form or fashion. Another factoid that he landed on them is that suffering can actually lead to a fuller experience of life! Yes, indeed, a great and horrible violence had been committed on Jesus but it was not that violence that had led to his resurrection.

His resurrection was the result of God's great love, as well as Jesus' willingness to suffer, also a sign of his great love for us. Redemption then, or to spell it out more plainly; our ability to love even our enemies, or to care for the sickest and the most needy, or even our willingness to risk our lives so that justice and peace prevail, is inextricably linked to the suffering love of God through Jesus.

Now I have been quite troubled this past week as images and stories from India have finally scratched and clawed their way into our various news outlets. It is all so horrific and likely overwhelming at times! No doubt many of us feel impotent to do anything about it and have become further paralyzed by this impotence! But we simply cannot give into our fears or into the doubts that there is nothing that can be done.

We must first acknowledge that much more could have been done that would have significantly lessened what we are witnessing. Certainly, the human costs of Covid-19 would still have been great even if the world community's response had been perfect. However, we know that human greed, unjust systems, racial and cultural biases have played an immense role in magnifying the suffering caused by the pandemic.

But this is where what happened after Emmaus becomes critical! As I tried to point out last week, as the three travelers travelled that horrible journey, it is a critically important realization that Jesus was always traveling with them and subsequently with us - even when we do not see him or recognize him, and especially even when we do not “feel” like he is with us.

The knowledge of his presence, along with the real presence of others who walk beside us, is not only essential but it is also enough. This fact can hopefully be of great consolation to us. But this is also true for each one who suffers and so what is happening now in India and among the poor throughout the world, who once again bear the brunt of human failure. We can be assured at least of this one thing, that Jesus is cradling each and every one of them, catching every tear and hearing every cry.

But the events that follow Emmaus do not exist in order to simply offer us consolation in our times of doubt and despair, they are also present in order to inspire us to action. I’ve found that it is much harder to give into despair when you’re busy. Focusing only on myself and only on my struggles leads to depression.

Knowing that God is there with those who suffer pain, or who experience sorrow or who personally feel the rod of injustice, will I believe, begin to also guide my feet precisely in their direction. Will there be fears? Yup! Doubts? Most certainly! Disappointments, defeats and despair? No doubt!

But the beloved and beautiful community of God’s love is so worth it! What has been witnessed in Emmaus and now Jerusalem must spread and will spread - and the fruits of what we have witnessed will compel us, as the passage concludes, to seek the forgiveness of sins (which most certainly must include wiping away the wrongs of injustice) and of repentance which is (as I just said), “our ability to love even our enemies, to care for the sick and needy, and even our willingness to risk our very lives so that justice and peace prevail.” And all of this is what happened after Emmaus! All of us must now live out God’s love, after our journey Emmaus to is over! And so, now, a new journey begins towards the poor and the oppressed with both brothers and sisters and Jesus by our side! Amen!

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