

3 Easter Year A

Lections: Acts 2:14a,36-41; Ps. 116:1-3,10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

It is a good morning as we continue to rejoice in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And as we rejoice, we also try to make sense of it as both a singular event in history and an ongoing spiritual reality that empowers everything we undertake as Christians. And to help us in those tasks, the lectionary gives us one more story about Jesus appearing to his disciples after the Resurrection to help us believe.

In scripture, Roads and paths are often the sites where God breaks into our human reality, especially in the books of Luke and Acts. Think not just of the Emmaus road, but also of the road to Damascus, where Paul, then called Saul, is blinded by a vision of Jesus. Or of the road to Gaza, where the apostle Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch and baptizes him.¹

It is along this road to the tiny village of Emmaus that two disciples—one named Cleopas and another unnamed—have an experience that defies their expectations and upsets their despair.

And it is clear they are in despair as the scene opens: “We had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel,” they tell the unrecognized Jesus. We had hoped, but those hopes were dashed when he was hung from a cross. But it is not just despair they feel. Biblical commentators often speculate that Cleopas and the other disciple are fleeing Jerusalem in fear after hearing about the missing body of Jesus that morning.

And so as one commentator puts it, what keeps them from truly perceiving him is that a crucified Messiah no longer meets their expectations of a redeemer.² A man who can suffer and die like Jesus did could not be the one to restore Israel’s independence, or purify the Jewish religion, or bring the knowledge of the God Jesus called Father to the entire world. What keeps their eyes from knowing it is Jesus right beside them is their misplaced assumptions.

One thing I have noticed recently is that it is not only the disciples’ eyes that are kept from recognizing Jesus. It is also their ears which are unable to recognize his voice.

After all, he was their teacher, their rabbi. They spent countless hours listening to him preach and teach. Even if his entire outer appearance had changed, wouldn’t they at least understood his voice? But they don’t.

¹ I’m grateful to the Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates for connecting these three instances of Scripture in an opening reflection he often gives at our diocesan discernment conferences. I first heard it in February 2019.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-luke-2413-35-9>

Church, can we imagine for a second what this must have been like for Jesus? To have been betrayed, tortured, and abandoned. To have died. And then to be woken up, raised from the dead, with a new, resurrected body, somehow both human and yet more than human. And here he comes to two of his disciples, his friends, knowing their fear and despair, longing to relieve it, and yet they cannot recognize him by his physical presence.

And so he begins to teach them all over again, just as he must have done years ago. How deliverance has always been part of God's plan. Through exodus and exile, slavery and captivity, God will always make a way where there seems to be no way, a way to freedom, to abundant life, and to everlasting love.

But *still*, Cleopas and his friend, can't recognize him, not even by his instruction. Even as they feel their hearts burning within them, their hope rekindling, their faith being strengthened, they don't—they can't—perceive the source of it as their teacher.

And so, I don't blame Jesus for wanting to leave them at Emmaus and go on ahead, perhaps to other disciples who would not let their unmet expectations be a stumbling block. But he relents to their strong urging and dines with them. And it is at that moment—when he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them—that the eyes of their hearts and the eyes of their minds are opened. Here, with a man who led by serving, who fed himself by feeding others, this is the moment when the disciples' expectations are re-set and they can accept that the crucified Jesus is also the resurrected Christ. They can accept that the redemption they have longed for is now possible, not just for Israel, the still-chosen people, but for the whole world, a redemption that is true liberation from everything that separates us from the God who made us, who loves us, and who is always with us.

And after Jesus, in his resurrected body, vanishes from their sight, they rush back the seven miles to Jerusalem, in the dark, finding the other disciples gathered late at night, both groups unable to contain their stories, and along with their stories, unable to contain their surprise and their joy that has finally cast out the fear and despair they began the day with.

And so I wonder, Grace Church, where have we, as individuals and as a community, been like Cleopas and his unnamed friend, going down a road out of fear or despair, or maybe anger or shame, and then meeting Jesus in someone or some circumstance we couldn't recognize as such in that moment? And I wonder when that person, or group, or situation has reminded us of what we once learned about creating, redeeming, and sustaining Love, and when our hearts were burning with rekindled faith and hope, but we still couldn't recognize it as Jesus with us. And I also wonder when we have persisted and have been astounded to find Jesus in the most unexpected places, completely overturning our expectations of what redemption, success, or victory would be like.

And here is why it matters, my friends. Because Cleopas, and Simon Peter, and all the other disciples, are changed by the Resurrection as well. And when we can let old expectations and ill-fitting assumptions about how the world is supposed to work, or how our lives are supposed to unfold, or even how church is supposed to look like fall away, we too can be changed. And when that happens, when our fear and despair is turned into surprise and joy, how can we not set out on new roads, running in the dark even, to tell our friends, our families, our neighbors, and anyone that will listen that we have met the risen Christ and it has made all the difference in our lives. Amen.