

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter 2015

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Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

This Sunday's gospel reading from Luke follows immediately after the famous account of Jesus' appearance to two of his friends on the road to Emmaus after his death and resurrection. And the story we just heard seems very similar to the first part of the story from John's gospel that we heard last Sunday about Doubting Thomas. So similar, in fact, that scholars generally agree that Luke and John are describing the same event. The disciples are huddled fearfully in a locked room wondering what will become of them when Jesus appears in their midst, proves that he is really Jesus by showing his wounds, teaches the disciples a thing or two, and then disappears again.

The two versions differ in details, though, because John and Luke have different points to make. John, whose Gospel is nearly ended when he recounts this story, focuses on the mission of the Christian community, showing Jesus sending his friends out to forgive the sins of others themselves, while Luke, who will have the entire book of Acts to talk about the mission of Jesus' followers, in today's reading is focused on their role as community, and as witnesses to what they have seen and been taught, with Jesus calling on them to proclaim the gospel of repentance and forgiveness.

It might seem a subtle difference – to forgive, or to teach about forgiveness, but it points to one of the struggles the first followers of Jesus had to wrestle with constantly as they tried to work out how to be faithful followers of Jesus' example

and teachings. Was the primary role of the followers of Jesus to tell the story of Jesus as fulfillment of God's promises and prophecies, or was their primary role to continue doing Jesus' work – healing, feeding, freeing, forgiving, as Jesus had done?

Of course, the answer to the question, as our ancestors worked out long ago, is that we are called to do both, but individual Christians and Christian communities still struggle in their own lives with the balance. We may be tempted to let our actions speak for us and forego the testimony about our faith and how God is alive in us, or we may, depending on our own temperament, be more at ease talking about Jesus' love than practicing it ourselves.

There is one thing in Luke's version of this story that really sticks out for me, though. And that is the fear that his disciples experience. When the two whom Jesus met on the road to Emmaus return to the disciples in their hidden room in Jerusalem, everyone is bubbling with excitement: "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."

And yet, when Jesus appears among them, we are told "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." Somehow, Jesus' appearance, instead of confirming the good news they themselves have just been hearing and proclaiming, terrifies them; makes them weaker in their faith and their joy, until Jesus, through the testimony of his body and his action of sharing a meal with them, removes their fear and restores their joy.

And this is the part of the gospel story that we repeat again and again. Jesus shows up among us – and Jesus does show up among us all the time – and instead of

recognizing him joyfully, we are startled and afraid. Jesus promises us that we will encounter him when he says, “Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in the midst of you.” And even more emphatically when he says, “Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me.” And yet when the stranger, the hungry, the sick, the outcast appears in our own version of that upper room – our place of safety, whether it’s church or home or neighborhood, we are not very good at recognizing Jesus; not very good at welcoming Jesus, not very good at rejoicing in Jesus’ presence.

We tend to fear the stranger. We do not relish the challenges to our routines, our community norms and values, or our comfortable understandings that the stranger brings. And as church communities, we are very practiced at sorting out strangers – the unchallenging ones, the ones who show themselves willing to become like us, we welcome with open arms. The ones who don’t fit in as well we keep at more of a distance; and the ones who challenge us the most, by their customs, culture, behavior, or neediness, we keep at more than arms’ length, helping them, perhaps, but not welcoming them.

And when we do that, we have missed Luke’s point and John’s. We have neither proclaimed nor practiced the gospel. And we have, quite possibly, failed to recognize and welcome Jesus when he is standing in the midst of us.

When Jesus shows up, it is always disruptive, just as it was in the gospel accounts. Jesus appears and asks us to drop what we are doing and follow. Jesus turns over the tables in our temples. Jesus leads us to break bread with outcasts and sinners and the sick, the friendless and the needy. Jesus appears in the most protected, secretive upper rooms of our lives and even our minds and bids us see the life in his wounded body, hear the life in his words, and embrace with joy the life in us.

And he means for us to see, hear and embrace that life as we encounter it in one another, and especially in the outsider, the stranger, the sick, the friendless and the needy.

Jesus will not stop coming to us in that way, not until we have accomplished the reign of God and there are no more strangers left to welcome. But we can stop meeting Jesus the stranger with fear, and choose to welcome him with joy.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!