

3 Easter, Yr. A

April 30, 2017

Acts 2:14a, 36-41, Luke 24: 13-35

As you may know, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were written by the same author. And that means, of course, that they have the same theology. One part of that theology is the emphasis on the Holy Spirit; another is on what's called reversal – that God's way is not the way of humans, that God is about reversing the human order by bringing God's Kingdom. And one way of putting that is that God is turning the world upside down.

Let's look first at the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel, Luke is about showing how the Holy Spirit is active in the life of Christ. In Acts, he's showing us how that same spirit, the Spirit of God, is active in Jesus' followers and in the church. So, in a way, this is a bit of a pre-Pentecost sermon.

What do we mean when we talk about the Holy Spirit? Most simply, it's the spirit of God, so, the spirit of love. Another way of thinking about it is that, following the resurrection, that power of God that was in Jesus is now no longer bound by time and space, but is loosed in the world, meaning that the love of God is alive among us, dwelling with us, working to make us a new people in Christ. So the Spirit of God, living in us, gives us new life, new understanding, and new power to believe and to love – to participate in God's very life.

In the story of Emmaus, we see the spirit in Jesus, but also in the two disciples. When the story begins, they are leaving Jerusalem, heavy of heart, despairing, disappointed, lamenting that the same old ways of the world had won again – in the failure of the Jewish leadership, in the fact that the political system could, as always, be manipulated by evil men, in the fact that Jesus' message was well and thoroughly rejected and that this man, who had been the light of their lives, was gone, executed in the most cruel and degrading way – the light had been put out. But then... (Great words, aren't they? Just when all hope was lost, BUT, THEN...!) They meet a stranger on the road. Actually the word could just as well be translated as "alien." How are they going to respond? They could have responded in fear, or let him pass by, they could have ignored him or shut him out or refused to talk with him, because, after all, who knew who he was? Instead, they engaged with him and, as they're walking along, they pour out their story, they invite him in to their sadness. We had hoped, they said, that he had come to redeem Israel.

I'd like to submit to you that this first move was a move toward hospitality, toward open hearts and open minds. Hospitality is most often thought of as inviting someone into our homes, but it's much deeper, it's openness to life – whether that means being open to new people or to new experiences or new ideas. Peter Gomes said somewhere that that's hard to do, especially with ideas. He said (not true, because he was brilliant) that he had so few ideas that he liked to keep the ones he had. And isn't that true of all of us? But here, these disciples are open enough, hospitable enough, to pour out their story to this stranger and then, equally important, to listen to him. And Jesus, Luke tells us, conducted a Bible study right there on the road..."beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures..." Wouldn't you give an arm and a leg to be in that Bible study? What he did for

them was to change their basic frame of reference. They had had expectations – that the Messiah would be a hero, a conqueror. They had hoped, they said, that he would redeem Israel, but his crucifixion killed those hopes. No, Jesus tells them: he was crucified and that was what DID redeem Israel. Because it was God himself on that cross, taking on the evil of the world and responding, not with hatred and retribution, but with love. Going through the suffering and coming out on the other side to new life. And that interpretation does, indeed, turn the message of the world upside down.

They were seeing it all wrong, says Jesus. And the need to see and understand are always with us. What we see when we look at the world depends on our assumptions our expectations, our world view, the understanding and interpretation we already hold. Remember the story of the old woman who crossed the Brazilian frontier every day on a motor scooter with a sack of sand behind her. The customs officer was suspicious and asked her what was in the sack. “Just sand,” was the reply. And when he checked, that was exactly right – nothing but sand. So it went, every day for a month. One day the officer told her that he wouldn’t arrest her or say anything to the police if she would just tell him whether she was smuggling or not. “Yes, I am,” she responded truthfully. “Well,” he said, “what are you smuggling?” “Scooters,” she replied.

So seeing – and that’s an interesting part of the story, too. Because the disciples don’t really SEE Jesus. Like Mary in the garden and Peter on the seashore, they see him but don’t recognize him until he breaks bread with them. I’ve not seen a copy of the Rembrandt painting of this moment, but apparently it shows the two disciples, one looking breathless and other clasping his hands as if in prayer. But the painting also shows the waiter, looking on with a kind of mild curiosity. He looks perplexed. Something is going on but he has no idea what. But the disciples’ eyes were opened. Why do you think? Was there something about the familiar action, the familiar words? Was it those actions combined with the teaching? Or maybe it was that when he took the bread the sleeve of his robe fell back and they saw the nail prints on his hands? Whatever it was, they finally SAW him.

I’d also like to look for a minute at Luke’s theme of reversal. We see that both in the gospel and in Peter’s sermon. All through Luke, it’s about the mighty and powerful being de-throned, as it were, and the marginalized being brought into the center. That’s what Jesus is saying to the disciples. That’s what Peter is saying to his listeners when he tells them to repent, to reorient their lives. In both cases, the message is to forget who thought was in charge, what you thought greatness was, who you thought you needed to pay attention to. Turn away from those messages of the world that tell us that nice guys finish last, or that life has no meaning, or that God is an irrelevant myth, or that you are on your own. Turn around and instead encounter this God who wants nothing more than to give you abundant life.

For us, as for the Emmaus disciples, it’s about coming to see. Part of that is the study of Scripture, part of that is Eucharist, part of that is being in community where the Holy Spirit abides with us. I was thinking about three phrases which I think encapsulate the whole journey. Remember when Jesus first called his disciples, he simply said, “COME AND SEE.” And then at the Eucharist the phrase is “TAKE AND EAT.” And at the end, it’s GO AND TELL – tell the good news of new life you’ve come to know. Or perhaps, even better, maybe that last phrase

should be GO AND DO. We can think of it as a spiral, circling upward, a cycle of prayer and study, (that come and see part) and then the sacramental and worship and community part (of Take and Eat) and finally the kind of life in which we put all this into practice. And that kind of life will take us back to a deeper seeing, and on it goes. I'd like to suggest something else here. Something about seeing and recognition and about watching for those Emmaus moments in our own lives. Some time ago, I read about a leader in a Presbyterian church in Kentucky who had a three-month sabbatical and so she decided to get out into the world to see what God was already doing there. She took a job as a waitress in a Waffle House. And she said that Christ showed up every single day. She related a number of stories from her time there:

- About a van carrying a family that broke down in the parking lot and the waitress who called her mechanic boyfriend who fixed the van for the price of a cup of coffee because the family had no money.
- About the lawyer who came every day and sat smoking his cigar and giving his time to people who couldn't afford legal help.
- About the crippled woman from Indiana who got stranded when her boyfriend got picked up by the police and whose landlord drove to Kentucky to pick her up and who seemed surprised when someone said how kind it was for him to do that.

I suspect that Christ shows up every day, not only in Kentucky, but in Sister Bay and Baileys Harbor and Ellison Bay. Watch for him and then follow him. Amen.