

This is now the *third* Sunday of hearing Easter stories in church. So I want to spend a little time putting what we are hearing into some perspective. And then I want to talk about some personal connections we may have with all this.

On *Easter Day* we heard a story of Jesus' resurrection from the Gospel of *Matthew*...and then last Sunday it was from the Gospel of *John*...and now today it is a story from the Gospel of *Luke*. They are all *similar* but also *different* stories of encounters with Jesus after he had been crucified. And *all* of these stories are still situated within that *first day*—the day *after* Jesus was buried...a *Sunday*...that *first Easter Day* when really strange things started happening.

On that first Easter Day, following after Jesus' crucifixion and burial, we can tell from all the stories that the disciples had *fragmented and scattered*. Peter seems to have vanished into *seclusion by himself*. One set of disciples which sometimes included Thomas had holed themselves up in a *locked room* in Jerusalem—we heard that story from John last week. In today's story from Luke, two disciples are *getting away from it all*, leaving Jerusalem on foot, heading to a village called Emmaus where apparently their home was. Even after reports from Mary Magdalene and others that Jesus' tomb was *empty*...and in some cases visions of *angels*...and initial reports that Jesus had been *seen* alive again—most of the disciples found it completely unbelievable at first. And they huddled up together in their various groups—or alone by themselves—*afraid...disillusioned...and grieved*. Who could blame them?

But...really strange things were afoot on that first Easter Day...and it took a while for it to sink in. When you read all the stories from all the gospel books, there is the sense that the *appearances of Jesus* were happening *simultaneously...in different places...with different groups* of the disciples. That in itself is inexplicable. And then you add in the other strangeness of...Jesus being alive again...and appearing...and just as quickly disappearing. And Jesus transitioning in a moment from being tangible to intangible...and unrecognizable to recognizable. That first Easter Day and for weeks afterwards—the stories tell of immensely inexplicable happenings. It is really worth reading all the stories and seeing for yourself.

But let's focus on today's story from Luke. Two disciples—one named Cleopas and the other unnamed—were walking on the road toward a village called Emmaus. They too were scattering, like the other disciples after Jesus' death. And as these two disciples were walking and talking and lamenting everything that had happened to Jesus—the story tells that Jesus joined them on the road. And this was another occasion where Jesus was not immediately recognizable—not until hours later when they invited the stranger into their home and broke bread with them that night. *And then they recognized him...and then he vanished*.

Now, the gospel books are clear that before Jesus' death, he spent a lot of time “breaking bread” with his disciples and anyone else who wanted to. To “break bread” in those days was simply a way of talking about *eating together*, i.e. bread was only available in a *loaf* and *in order to share it you had to break it apart*. And maybe all you had to eat was bread...and maybe some wine. So, Jesus did that a lot with others. He was also criticized for it. And of course there was that particularly poignant occasion of “breaking bread” which we call Jesus' Last Supper where Jesus specifically identified that sharing with his suffering and death.

But it is *totally strange* that eating together would continue to be a feature of some of the resurrection appearances--*as it did at Emmaus*. I don't even know how to understand that. But from that time onwards, Christians breaking bread together...often with wine...also became inseparably linked with the mystery of the resurrection. What do we say at Holy Communion still? *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again*.

The Emmaus story, and others like it, is why we do what we do here in church almost every Sunday: we read the scriptures, we pray, maybe we sing some, and we break bread together. And we break bread together in a way which has evolved to become very minimal and focused—just a little bit of bread and wine. And so it is that every Eucharist/Holy Communion/Lord’s Supper/Mass/Divine Liturgy—all the many names Christians have come to call this over the centuries—every Eucharist here and everywhere is in fact a return to the breaking of bread in Emmaus that first Easter Day.

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This is just one reason, among many, that, the more I grew in my understanding of the Bible...and Christian tradition...and my experience of Holy Communion—that I wanted to become an Episcopalian and a priest. I wanted to be in a church that *returned to Emmaus every Sunday*...to the mystery of his resurrection in the face of death...to a place of awe and reverence which seemed to be the right place to be when you are in the presence of God.

Yes, this Holy Communion is surrounded by a lot of *ritual*. But that is what you do when you want to preserve something which is of great importance which is cherished and you want to be able to keep returning to it and also pass it along through the generations beyond ourselves—just as has indeed happened. A lot has happened in history since that first Easter Day breaking of bread in Emmaus with Jesus, crucified and risen, as the host. A lot has happened, many wonderful and terrible things since then...a lot of time has passed...and yet in the deepest sense, *it is still that first Easter Day, today...and next Sunday...and the next*. The mystery of Easter Day is the *timeless* happening over and over again *in time*.

The ritual that *holds* and *cherishes* Jesus’ breaking of bread with his disciples helps us to remember where we too belong, as time pulls us along, and yet for a moment we are also pulled out of time. It invites us to a *reverence* and *awe* which we easily forget in the midst of time. The ritual returns us over and over to Emmaus and the mystery of God in the mystery of Jesus. Often enough we can’t see with either our eyes--or the eyes of our hearts--who our host really is in this “breaking of bread”. But once in a while, something happens on a Sunday and something breaks through to us, yes?

Priests are no different from you in this regard. We are of course ordained to do this for you and with you. We study this ritual. We are mentored into the practice of it. We cherish it. And sometimes something of God breaks through to us too. But a lot of the time it is something we do...*because it is what we do*...even when we can’t quite say why, yes? Except, at least, perhaps...*the reverence...the awe...a moment of gentleness and peace...in a time out of time*.

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The fragmentation and fear of the disciples changed after their experiences of the risen Jesus. They came back together in larger groups. Peter and Thomas each returned from wherever they were. They shared their new experiences of Jesus which were starting to multiply and their new understanding of scripture. They started to break bread together again and they continued. They started becoming church together. And so here we are two thousand years later doing the same thing. What started *then*...is still *today*.

“When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight...[later] they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”