

"Hopelessness to Joy"
Luke 24:13-35

May 4, 2014

3rd Sunday of Easter

We can hardly imagine the hopelessness experienced by those two disciples as they walked the road to Emmaus on that first Easter evening. They had thought they had everything figured out. Jesus of Nazareth *was* the Messiah who would redeem Israel and they were to be part of that Messianic kingdom. They had heard Him speak. They had seen the miracles He did. This weekend, they thought, would be the culmination of everything they had hoped for and dreamed of. Yet it had all fallen apart. Jesus had been arrested, tried in an illegal trial, unjustly convicted, and nailed to a cross until dead. Some had reported that the tomb had been empty that morning and they had seen Jesus alive. But none of it made any sense to them.

Their problem was far worse than sadness and hopelessness. Those were only symptoms of a greater problem. Their problem was two-fold. First, their problem was a misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus' mission. They "had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." But what exactly did they mean by that? Their concept of redemption likely included political and social redemption. Jesus would be the one to free Israel from Roman tyranny and re-establish it as a prominent nation. Jesus would be the one who would free Israel from poverty, hunger, and want. They had seen indications of that throughout Jesus' entire ministry. Yet everything had gone awry in these past few days. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ had dashed their hopes.

Secondly, their problem was simply unbelief. The nature of the Messiah's mission had been clearly foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures. And, if that wasn't clear enough, Jesus had stated several times during His three year ministry that this would happen. "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled," Jesus had said. "He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again." (Luke 18:31-33) Hearts, blinded by sin, did not understand

this or refused to believe this. So, it is no wonder that they felt no joy but were filled with hopelessness and despair on that first Easter evening. Things weren't going as they thought they should.

The people of our day and age are a lot like those disciples. We wander around in lives of hopelessness and despair. Like them, we know the facts about the life and ministry of Jesus. Whether you are a faithful church member, an occasional worshiper, or a visitor, you've likely heard the stories of Jesus' teaching about love and forgiveness and the miracles He did. People know about Jesus and the cross. They like know something about the claims of resurrection.

But, like the disciples, we often misunderstand the implications of Jesus' work. Although we talk about forgiveness of sins and eternal life, do we not often share the Emmaus' disciples' notions about "redemption"? Do we not think that, because we are Christians, we are to be redeemed from the troubles of this world? We may expect that, because we follow Jesus, our lives here should be better. We should expect more success in our vocations, less pain and suffering, and more acceptance for our proclamation of the Easter message. If things are going wrong, then we think there must be something wrong with God. We're filled with sadness and despair.

Like the Emmaus' disciples, our basic problem is one of unbelief. We have the clear words of Scripture which tell us the nature of Jesus' mission and the nature of discipleship. After telling His disciples that He must suffer and die on the cross, Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) Yet, with hearts blinded by sin and our own interpretation of things, we choose to overlook these words or refuse to believe that they actually apply to us.

What's the answer? Well, if it was up to us, we'd ask for some miraculous sign or proof to clear up our confusion and do away with our unbelief. On that road to Emmaus that first Easter evening, Jesus had the chance to do just that with the confused and unbelieving disciples. He could

have just said, "Hey, guys, look at the nail prints in my hands. See where the spear pierced me through! It's me, Jesus!"

However, Jesus chooses a different way to handle the situation, a way that would show how He planned to handle misunderstanding and unbelief from that time on. Rather than using miraculous signs and proofs, Jesus, instead, catechizes the disciples. He holds a walking catechism class on the road. He uses the Law to condemn them for their unbelief: "O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

Then, Jesus turns to the Gospel. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." Although we don't have of record of *what* He taught, He did clear up their confusion. The Christ's job was one of spiritual redemption, not political or social redemption. He came to conquer sin, not merely its symptoms of tyranny, oppression, poverty and suffering. The cross, far from being an instrument to destroy their hopes, was actually the tool by which this redemption had taken place. And since God has promised in the Old Testament Scriptures that He would not allow His Holy One to see decay, the reports of the women at the tomb were true. The Messiah was alive! The Messiah, who had conquered sin through His death, had conquered death through His resurrection.

This little catechism class astounded the two disciples for later they said that their hearts burned within them. But it was only preparation for what was coming next, an even greater climax than this. After urging Jesus to stay with them, they reclined at table together to have the evening meal together. In those days eating together was more than simply a way to relieve hunger. A meal was an act of hospitality, acceptance, and fellowship. The Scripture says that Jesus "took the bread, and blessed and, broke it and gave it to them," much as He had done with the Twelve on the night before He died. A most amazing thing then occurs. The text says, "And their eyes were opened and

they recognized him." It was in this meal which Jesus gave to them that He revealed Himself to them. The resurrection here became a reality for them.

Their sadness was changed into inexpressible joy. Their doubt and disbelief were turned into faith and confidence. Their hopelessness over what had happened was transformed into hope because of what had happened. And why? First, it was Jesus' teaching, His explanation of the goal and meaning of Scriptures. Secondly, it was Jesus' sharing of a meal in which He revealed Himself to them. When they got up and returned to Jerusalem to bear witness to their new found faith in Christ and His resurrection, they told "how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread."

This is how Jesus still works today to alleviate our sadness, do away with our disbelief, and transform our hopelessness. We don't have to remain trapped in our own preconceived and mistaken notions of what redemption means or our unbelief of what it all means. Jesus' disappearance from the disciples' table at Emmaus shows us that Jesus operates in a slightly different way these days. He is no longer visibly present with His followers, one place at a time. He is with them in a very different way in many places at once.

As we walk along the road of our lives in confusion and unbelief, Jesus joins us and begins talking with us. Our eyes may not recognize Him. For, you see, the Good Shepherd now sends undershepherds called pastors to speak for Him. Pastors are called, not merely to give the facts about Jesus which many may already have, but to teach the meaning of those facts.

As on that road to Emmaus, first comes the Law which condemns us for our sin and unbelief. But then comes the Gospel which shows us that Jesus, the Christ, has truly redeemed us, i.e. bought us back from our condemnation to everlasting torment in hell, by His condemnation to the cross, His enduring of hell there, and His death.

Jesus then reveals the reality of the resurrection to us, not through flashy miracles, but, again, like at Emmaus, through the breaking of bread at a meal - His Holy Supper. In the Lord's Supper, we recognize the living Lord, present among us in the bread and the wine. His presence as we dine here

is just as real and faith affirming as it was for those two disciples at Emmaus. The Lord lives! His work of redemption has been completed and is given to us in these signs of bread and wine. The Lord lives! And, by His living, we receive life. We have the life of discipleship which we live now, in the midst of sorrow, pain, and suffering, but with His presence, peace, and power. We have the life of glory which is awaiting us in heaven which Jesus is preparing for us now. As St. Peter put it in last week's epistle reading:

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade --kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. (1 Peter 1:3-6)

Thus, this influences how we worship as Christians. Worship is not designed to be pep talks and music that primarily appeal to our emotions in order to make us "feel good." Rather, we first enjoy a Word from God and then a meal with God. "Teaching and eating, Word and Sacrament, form the foundation of Christian worship." (Just, p.1018) It is the teaching which causes our hearts to burn within us as we are moved from unbelief to faith. It is the eating which confirms that faith by allowing us to personally experience fellowship with the living Lord. That is why, in the early church and for many years after that, every Sunday worship service always included both preaching and Holy Communion, the Service of the Word followed by the Service of the Sacrament. They were seen as necessary compliments of one another. The teaching would prepare for and lead to the fellowship enjoyed in the meal. The meal would compliment and reinforce the teaching.

Two weeks ago, our hearts were burning within us and our joy was overflowing as we celebrated the Resurrection of our Lord. Last week, the temperature went down a bit as our worship attendance on Sunday dropped. But it doesn't have to be that way. The joy of Easter and the hope that it gives us does not have to be limited to a once a year celebration. In fact, the early church

chose Sunday as its day of worship (rather than the Sabbath) so that each week would be a "little Easter."

Today may not seem like a little Easter. But we do have everything that those disciples on the road to Emmaus had on that first Easter. We have the Lord Jesus teaching us in His Word and overcoming our doubt with His mercy and forgiveness. We have the Lord Jesus providing us with a meal and revealing Himself to us to strengthen our faith. Come and listen! Come and eat! Then, when we leave this place, we will say with the disciples from Emmaus, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" and "Did we not recognize Him when He broke the bread?" Thus we have moved from hopelessness to full of hope. We now live, not in sadness, but in joy. Amen.