

## **Easter III**

### **April 6, 2008**

During the Easter season, we spend a lot of time hearing stories of the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. And, if you stop and think about it, virtually all of these appearances are with and for the big-name people, the stars of the Gospels, like Peter and Mary and John and the eleven disciples; and they are all with people who happened to be at the right place at the right time—usually in the big city.

But what about everyone else, what about the ordinary Joseph who wasn't a big name, who was out of town when the exciting stuff happened, and who was never going to be famous no matter what? How did these people meet the Risen Christ, what was it like for them, (for us,) to come face to face with Easter? There is a special resurrection account about this, a special story for us and for everyone like us down through the ages. It's the story we just heard, about the otherwise unknown followers of Jesus who were someplace else when all the really exciting things were going on.

But to get at how the road to Emmaus story is about us, it is helpful to take just a minute to remember a couple of things about how the New Testament was put together.

By the time the Gospel of Luke was written, the Church had already been around and thriving for about 60 years—that's three generations. During all of these years the Church had been worshiping, and reflecting, and learning about the Lord—both from God the Holy Spirit and from one another. The Church had heard and told and retold and talked and prayed about lots and lots of stories about Jesus—about his teachings and his ministry, his life, his death and his resurrection. What happened to the Church, what it learned and discovered, during all of those years—all of this affected how they heard, how they understood, and how they told and retold these precious stories.

That is nowhere more true, and nowhere more important, than with the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection. They were then, as they are now, the most important stories in the world. They were treasured and told with a special care; and they were given very special attention. They were pondered and thought about and applied to ordinary life. There were a bunch of these stories, and the Gospel writers chose which ones they included very carefully, and for very particular reasons.

Of all the stories about the resurrected Lord, and of all the ways there were to tell those stories, Luke choose this one, the road to Emmaus story, and this particular way of telling it, as his way of talking about what it is like for ordinary people to meet the Lord. The story is about Jesus and Easter Sunday, but it is also about some things the Church had learned during its first sixty years, things it wanted to tell the first people who read the story, things it still wants to tell us.

So, what is it like for ordinary people to meet the Risen Lord? It's like this: It's like taking a special time on our ordinary journey to hear the words of Scripture, to hear the law and the prophets talked about and explained in terms of Jesus, of who Jesus is and of what Jesus means. It's like, maybe three or four Bible readings and a sermon. It's like what we are doing right now. That's the first part of it, of what meeting Jesus is like. It's like this, right now.

But that's not enough. This is not enough. Luke and the early Church knew right from the beginning that the Bible and the sermon aren't enough by themselves to lead people to discover fully the one who is already, and by own his initiative, right in front of them. All the Bibles in the world, all the sermons in the world, all by themselves or even all together, don't fully reveal the risen Lord, even if he is standing right there. Something else needs to happen if we are going to see that the Resurrection really happened, and that it is still happening where we are.

Followers of Jesus need to gather around a table, and the bread needs to be taken, blessed, broken and given—just as Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave bread on the night he was betrayed. Just as he took, blessed, broke and gave on all those hillsides surrounded by hungry multitudes. Just as the early Church had taken, blessed, broken and given every Lord's day, every Sunday, for those sixty years or so since the resurrection. In addition to the scripture and the teaching, that had to happen, too, if the Risen Lord was to be fully known and recognized. He had been there all along, but he was for all practical purposes invisible; until he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

What it looks like for regular and ordinary people to discover the risen Lord includes what we are about to do, in just a minute, when the gifts on the altar are taken, blessed, broken and given. It looks like what we do with every Sunday with such frequency and ease that we all too easily forget the reality and the significance of the moment.

When Luke chose this story and this way of telling it, it was because the early Church had learned, had absorbed into its very bones, the fact that when it gathered and did this thing, which Jesus had commanded, then the risen Lord was present, and could be known. Grace was given; and faith could be renewed and commitments strengthened. So, Luke very deliberately told this story of the resurrection in this way, with each step of the story corresponding exactly to a familiar movement in that Eucharist that the early church knew so very well; and that we know so well.

This way, people would understand that if they weren't in Jerusalem on Easter Day, and if they weren't one of the biggies in the Church like Peter or Thomas or John, well, that didn't mean they had missed it all. That didn't mean that they could never know the power or the presence of Jesus.

For that to happen, they didn't have to go anywhere else—in space or in time. To know the Lord, what they needed to do was to make a place in their journey for the Scripture to be explained and interpreted in the light of Jesus; and they needed to gather around a table for the breaking of the bread.

This is the continuing form of the resurrection. It isn't the only way Jesus is known, but it is probably the best bet, the most reliable way, for folks like us—whether it was during the first sixty years of the Church's life, or during the next one thousand, nine hundred, and eighteen years (give or take).

Now, what it looks like, and what it feels like, to discover the Lord's presence here won't be exactly what it was like then. I'm not going to turn into Jesus. That was only once, only then, to make the point. Then the Lord vanished—and he vanished because we have the Eucharist and that's what we need now. In this time together, in what we say and what we do, in the bread and wine, in the faces of one another and in the silence of our hearts, the Lord is really present. If we look with hope and patience we will discover him, and we will discover that our awareness of him can propel us out of here into ministry with all the energy those first followers used to run back to Jerusalem.

This is the special word about the resurrection, and the resurrected Jesus, that Luke is giving us today. Remember, the story of the road to Emmaus is not only a story about Easter Day. It is a story about what the church learned early and wants us to know. It is a story about us, about today, and about right now.