

Sermon, April 26, 2020

Good morning. Welcome again to stay-home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and joining us this morning will be Sean Beachy on piano and Gary Wotherspoon will sing for us. If you would like to share your musical talents with us in the weeks ahead, please let me know. The Easter Children's sermon with Nicole, Ashley and Taylor was great too, and if you would like to present one, let me know. Meanwhile many of our kids have been joining us for Virtual Sunday School on Sunday mornings. If your children or grandchildren or even your neighbor's kids want to join in, just call the Church office and we will add them to the list. As for how much longer we will be worshipping this way, who knows? As long as it takes, I guess. Glad you could join us today.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. O God, your Son makes himself known to all his disciples in the breaking of the bread. Open the eyes of our faith, that we may see him in his redeeming work, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Luke, the twenty-fourth chapter.

Now on that same day two of [the disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he 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. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. 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.

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Most Bible scholars consider Luke the best story teller among the gospel writers, and many agree with me that this is probably his best story. It's Luke's tale of two disciples and Jesus, meeting up while walking along the Road to Emmaus.

Since the early days of biblical archaeology, Christians especially have been trying hard to find the remnants or ruins of the town called Emmaus. No luck so far. They have identified seven possible sites to date, but none seem all that promising.

Emmaus isn't mention anywhere else in our Bibles, although the non-canonical Book of first Maccabees says there once was a big battle there. Which apparently the good guys won.

The name Emma-ous' comes from the Hebrew word Hammat that means 'warm spring.' (Well it certainly wasn't located in Garrett County. Because we haven't had a warm spring since we moved here.)

But Hammat probably means the other kind of warm spring, which apparently over the centuries dried-up.

The latest candidate for the ancient town of Emmaus is a place called Tel Motza. It is, as Luke described, about seven miles from Jerusalem. There is a sharp turn in the road to Tel Motza that has caused many car accidents.

The government is building a bridge that will replace the dangerous curve, and excavations of the site by the Israel Antiquities Authority have produced some promising evidence of a town there two thousand years ago. I'll keep you posted.

To understand this story in context, it is set before the evening appearance of Jesus to the disciples without Thomas that we read about

last week. And just after the story of Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb that we read the week before that, on Easter Sunday.

I have always wondered about Cleopas—the guy given a name on the Road to Emmaus. He is never again mentioned in the Bible.

Cleopas is referred to as a “Disciple,” but he certainly doesn’t appear in anyone’s list of the twelve. Various legends and traditions have identified Cleopas as everyone from Alphaeus, the father of disciples James and/or Levi the tax collector; to the Virgin Mary’s Brother-in-law or maybe even second husband. Say What?

Cleopas is a shortened form or nickname for the Greek name Cleopatros, which literally means, “One with a famous father.”

But as the saying goes, “fame can be fleeting.” Today we have no idea who his famous father even was.

And yes, Cleopatros could also be shortened to Clopas—an Aramaic form of the name and another mysterious character mentioned only once, over in the Gospel of John.

Could it be the same guy? Sure! But that’s not much help, because the only thing we know for sure about Clopas is that he had a wife named Mary, who was one of the Marys at the cross.

Clopas apparently wasn’t there himself. As a male disciple he probably ran away to save his own skin, like all the other men did.

There has been much speculation about who the unnamed disciple with Cleopas may have been. I’d guess probably his wife Mary. They were heading to the same house, after all, intending to share a meal and spend the night. Written for folks living in a very patriarchal society, some scholars think the gospel authors didn’t like to mention even important women by name unless they absolutely had to.

Others speculate the second disciple was intentionally left unnamed, as a literary ploy allowing us to imagine ourselves in his shoes. Or her shoes.

Of course the unnamed apostle could have just been someone Luke's audience wouldn't know by name. Maybe a no-longer-so-famous father. Some think Luke's purpose in recording this story was to teach us a little sacramental theology. You know—that you can count on the risen Jesus being present in the Eucharistic breaking of the bread. Maybe. But to me this story has always meant something else.

Why the obsession with learning about Cleopas, and finding the site of Emmaus? Probably so that pilgrims and tourists by the thousands could walk that very road, just like Cleopas and the other disciple. I thought this week that someday I would like to walk the road to Emmaus. And then it hit me that at this particular time in our lives, maybe in a way, we already are.

I have always been intrigued by the gospel accounts where the risen Jesus goes unrecognized. Did Mary really not identify him at first at the tomb? If they were indeed his disciples, why wouldn't Cleopas and his friend or wife realize this was Jesus talking to them on the road?

But then this week I read an interesting commentary by Rev. Dr. Richard Swanson, who teaches biblical interpretation at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Yes, Augustana is a Lutheran School. And yes, Swanson is a Lutheran pastor and educator. Most biblical scholars are.

Swanson points out some interesting things about verse 21, where Cleopas and his companion say, "We had hoped Jesus was the one to redeem Israel." And I'll spare you the Greek language lesson I was prepared to give you, about the imperfect tense of the verb "hoped" and the temporal augment and the tendential form of imperfect

verbs...(You're welcome!) Suffice it to say that when the apostles on the road said, "We had hoped" the implication is that they did not hope any more.

And that thought worries me, as we continue to hunker down in isolation in our homes, cut off from friends and family for who knows how long. Swanson says that we prefer future tense verbs, especially in times of stress and fear. We want to hear, "Don't worry, everything is going to be okay and get better, or at least back to normal." Even though we don't really know WHAT normal is going to look like, or WHEN. Meanwhile, we need to be careful to keep our faith and not lose hope.

Because the Jesus whom Cleopas and his companion had given up on, was right there with them on the difficult road when they most needed him. The Risen Jesus is also still with us, often unrecognized, not just to save us in the future at the end. But also to walk the road with us in the often troubling here and now.

In my fifteen years as pastor of St. Mark's, I have often sensed the risen Jesus as active in our church. Even though at first I often didn't recognize him either. And in tense and frightening times like these, even more so.

One day I trust we WILL be worshiping and learning and singing and praying again with each other in this place. And breaking bread, where the Risen Jesus always appears. The sooner the better.

But in the meantime, look around. You might be surprised where you find him. Martin Luther once wrote that the Gospel is not written in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars. Luther said the promise of the resurrection isn't limited to what could be written in all the world's books; it is in every leaf of spring time.

Reflecting on a lifetime of ministry that included caring for thousands of sick and hungry children, Mother Theresa once remarked, "You know, I think each one of those children was really Jesus in disguise." I

recognize Jesus all the time these days. I see him in the faces of firemen, police, teachers, store clerks, truck drivers, farmers and health care workers, putting their lives on the line every day to keep us safe.

The problem with Cleopas and his friend was that they were sad and disappointed and had flat-out stopped looking for him. Let's keep our eyes open, so that like Luther, we too see that the Risen Jesus really is in every tree and flower; and every leaf of springtime. Always walking alongside us. Regardless how rough and dangerous the road we travel can sometimes be. Amen.