

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Easter 3A 2008

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Don't you just love a good story wonderfully told! The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is one of the best pieces of narrative in the Bible! It is so human, so universal and so real that just about everyone can enter it someplace. It opens with two disciples leaving Jerusalem after the Passover Feast walking along the road to Emmaus. A man walks alongside them and the narrator lets us in on a secret – it is the risen Christ but these guys don't know it. Jesus asks them, “What are you discussing?” Don't you just love eavesdropping! Our mothers were right – it is rude, but everyone does it, apparently even the Risen Christ. Now we are hooked.

Their sad faces tell us that it is not going to be a happy story and they relate the story of the arrest and crucifixion by chief priests and rulers of this man Jesus. We don't really know much about these two people – who they are, where they lived, what they did -whose lives are now connected to ours thanks to our own eavesdropping. Aside from the fact that one is named Cleopas, we don't know much about them other than that they were disciples of this man Jesus. They tell the stranger that he was “a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.” They are leaving Jerusalem on the third day - what we call Easter – heading

to a small village called Emmaus. They tell the stranger the women had told tales of seeing an angel telling them that Jesus was alive. But their sad faces, their use of the past tense and the fact that they are heading out of town tell us that they have given up hope. Mixed in with their grief over this Jesus' crucifixion is the death of their own hopes and dreams: "But we had hoped that he was the one who was to redeem Israel!"

Along the way, they have an engaged and enlightening conversation about the scriptures with the stranger. As they approach their destination, Jesus walked ahead as if he were going to continue on. That shows good manners not wanting to intrude on them or impose upon their hospitality. "No, No!" they say, "stay with us because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." That, too, shows good manners since they provide their own concern for his safety as reason for him to accept. When they were at table, the story tells us "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." Then "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." Just as quickly, he vanished.

What are we to make of such a story? What is Luke trying to convey? Reading this resurrection appearance account again, I think there are several truths to be found in it. I think the first truth is along the lines of Phil Rizzuto when he said 90% of the game is in just showing up. I love the every day ordinariness of this account – two guys walking down a road together. That is very biblical! Noah was probably just going about his business when he was told to build a boat. Abraham and Sarah were just living normal lives before they were given promises in order to have them move – and that was before the lets have a baby business! Think about it; Moses was just putting in another day's work watchin his father-in-law Jethro's sheep when he came upon a burning bush.

A lot of people go to great lengths to have a religious experience. Some go to ashrams in India or temples in Asia. Some engage in extreme ascetic practices. Some join cults that tell them there is no welcome for them and that they must “get right with God” – of course on their terms - before God will have anything to do with them. But here we see just the opposite.

We don't know why Cleopas and his companion were going to Emmaus. We do know that they were downcast and despairing, at a low point. “We had hoped,” they said, “that he was the one to redeem Israel.” “But we had hoped” – haven't we all been there? Emmaus was a non-descript place, maybe it was their home and there old lives they were returning to once Jesus didn't seem to work out. Frederick Buechner interprets Emmaus as “the place we go to in order to escape – a bar, a movie, the gym wherever we go to throw up our hands” and say the hell with it! For some Emmaus may even be going to church!

So one of the truths of this story is that we don't have to go out looking for the divine or engage in great deeds. God meets us in our daily lives. God is right there with us in the everyday world whether or not life is going great – or not. God is right there with us whether we deserve it or not. Jesus was not demanding anything of these men; he was there to freely give new life and hope. Another truth I find in this story is that changing our lives and values are consequences of God's grace not its precursor. The tricky part, of course, is being willing – and thus able – to see it.

This brings us to another truth I find in this story. The Risen Jesus made himself available but he would not impose himself. It was up to Cleopas and his companion to invite the stranger to their table. It is just as unreasonable to expect God to do all the work and take all the risk as it is to think that we can do it all

ourselves. Relationships don't work that way and our Biblical God is a God of relationship.

Where did they find their experience of the Risen Christ? Where did they get to see the triumph of the love of God? Not, I am sure, in any way they had been taught or in any way they had expected it. I have had a few religious experiences and I hope that so too have many of you. Think about them. Did they happen when and how you thought they might? Or did they happen in the most ordinary times or unexpected circumstances?

I have my own Emmaus story to share with you. This week I got an e-mail from a woman from St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Anchorage, Alaska. She had been here at Holy I last December 16th when we had done our "Paper Bag Christmas Pageant" and she asked for a copy of it so they might do it in her parish this year. I took that request as a very big gift to this parish which I am now sharing with those responsible for it. She had had an experience here of the Risen Christ in our simple pageant and, like Cleopas and friend running back to Jerusalem, she wanted to share it.

I once had my own Emmaus moment in Anchorage and thought one good deed deserved another so I shared it with her as I now share it with you. I was in Anchorage 12 years ago on corporate business. My parent company had acquired our largest competitor and were getting rid of us. I was there to start getting the needed regulatory approvals. On Sunday, I left the meetings and went to a small Episcopal Church downtown near the hotel. The place looked ordinary enough, but I felt strangeness about it and didn't know why. I found out why when the sermon began. The preacher was all about what we had to think or believe to be right with God and

went jumping from one book to another in the Bible to prove his opinions. He was doing what I call trampoline preaching – jumping on the text in order to bounce as far away from it as possible and into his own agenda. I don't know about you, but when I hear that kind of preaching I mentally have one hand on my wallet and the other on the doorknob to get out.

During the announcements, as I was trying to figure out a way to quietly leave, a woman got up in the back. She announced that she was from St. Mary's and was there to ask for donations to their food bank. She explained that it was already late September and the Vietnam Vets and others were coming down from the hills to get stocked up for winter. I heard one of the best sermons of my life that day in that church – from that lady from St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Anchorage, Alaska - one I have remembered for 12 years. Just as I had just about despaired of finding God in church – that one or any other – the Risen Christ appeared fleetingly through the goodness of that woman.

That's the funny thing about Easter – it has been happening every day for the past 2000 years. Once experienced, it stretches into the rest of our lives. And we never know when it will touch us.

Amen.