

Rector's Sermon: 26th April 2020

And so we find ourselves now in the middle of this Easter season, having arrived at the third Sunday after the Resurrection, and the lectionary shares an extraordinary narrative of how new life breaks into the midst of shattered hopes. Quite an appropriate story for our present circumstances, I think you'd agree.

Today, we are transported back again to Easter evening – “that same day” when Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, and the other women discover the empty tomb and Peter confirms their news. On “that same day,” we meet two of Jesus’ disciples on the road from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. The two - one is named Cleopas, we’re told, we are not told the name of the other - are discussing all that has happened: how Jesus had taught and healed; how that same Jesus was betrayed, flogged, and made a spectacle of shame; and how that same Jesus had breathed his last and was laid in a sealed tomb.

Add to all this the breaking news that Jesus’ body is apparently now missing and just listen to the confusion swirl and the questions fly. How has this have happened? Has he been taken? What are we to do now? Where do we go from here? The two disciples are completely overtaken by events and powerless to respond.

It feels a little bit like that now doesn’t it? We are asking questions as to how we are in our present predicament. Our media are all asking questions as to how we are in our present predicament and what is going to happen. We feel overtaken by events and powerless to respond. And so, when faced with a crisis, we strive to wrestle back some control, some hold over the situation as a means of satisfying our fear and anxiety. Here, the two disciples have seven miles to go around in endless circles, ruminating on their terrible loss and trying to take in the fear, wonder and anxiety at all they have heard and experienced, as they trudge on to Emmaus. “Really’s?” and “what if’s” animate their footsteps amidst exhaustion and abandonment.

“But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” It’s a statement saturated with honesty and pain—a confession of sorts. Jesus was the One who was to restore Israel, to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. Jesus was the One for whom generations had longed, hope built upon hope for centuries. And this One finally had a face, Jesus’ face. Now, even after his death, that face was gone, vanished from view. Imagine the weight of grief. Imagine the intensity of loss. Imagine all that compounded by utter confusion.

It might not be all that hard to imagine, honestly. The Emmaus road is one that familiar to so many of us. During these last couple of months the road to Emmaus has become a well-worn path, dotted with defeat and disappointment, marked by sinking diagnosis, inevitable questions, and disbelief. Life seasons and circumstances often determine how steep or winding or rocky this road is, but collectively we are all walking the Emmaus road at the moment.

The beauty we experience week in and week out in the scriptures is the revelation that the living God meets us on this road. The living God comes alongside us unexpectedly in moments of loss and difficulty. The living God walks with us in times that tempt despair and despondency, whether we realize it or not. And this is precisely what Cleopas and his friend experience on their Emmaus road, as they encounter a stranger mid-step.

“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” he asks. He must have been hiding under a rock, they think. Otherwise, why on earth would he ask about the strange things which had transpired? Little do the disciples know that this is the One whom they have been mourning. Maybe it’s grief obscuring their vision. Maybe hypotheticals have dulled their senses. Or maybe the disciples are too entangled in the weeds of dashed hopes. Whatever it is, they fail to recognize the One in their midst.

But Jesus is there still and hears them out. Jesus listens to their stories of disappointment, at the core of which is his absence. He hears of how he was handed over, condemned, crucified, and buried along with the hopes of Israel. He hears of how his body is missing. Jesus walks stride-in-stride with his dejected followers, listening intently. Even if the news isn’t breaking, the disciples’ hearts and dreams are, spilled out before this stranger.

The women, the disciples tell this stranger, went to the tomb, but they did not find him. The irony is surely not lost though for Jesus is in front of their eyes, the disciples fail to see him. “Have you not heard the prophets? Have their words not sunk in?” Jesus asks. Remember Moses and your forebears in the faith. Remember the prophets. Remember the scriptures, dripping with promise. How often on this very same road do we fail to notice that Jesus is there, present, walking alongside us?

The disciples’ hearts begin to burn, as they wonder after the identity of this stranger. But there is still some distance, some doubt, that clouds their vision and obscures their eventual recognition of who is walking and talking with them. If we read around in the gospels, though, this is pretty typical of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. It takes time or some sort of personal revelation for this otherworldly visitation to register. Remember that well-known story of Mary Magdalene confusing the risen Christ for a gardener. Remember too that startling scene - immediately after the Emmaus Road episode - when we read that it takes some time for the disciples’ eyes to recognise the risen Christ himself.

Today Jesus becomes known in the blessing, breaking, and giving of bread. It seems near impossible for the disciples not to have connected this supper with the last supper, when Jesus said he would not eat with them again until the Passover had been fulfilled. There seems to be too strong a connection with the two meals not to see a common bread, a common host. In this simple action of blessing, breaking, and sharing, we’re told, something dramatic happens. As Jesus tears apart that simple loaf, crumbs of disbelief and hopelessness fall to the ground. The disciples’ eyes, once

clouded with tears, become open to the realities of the resurrection and the provisional character of death.

If the Emmaus Road narrative teaches us anything, it is that God blesses, breaks and shares in and through our lives and which we see repeatedly lived out through the life, death, and ministry of Jesus. Jesus seems far more visible when we live lives open to being blessed, broken and shared, and it so often at times of vulnerability, sickness and danger that Christ presence feels so much closer. It is through the vulnerability of our humanity that the divine, resurrected life shines brightest.

With the sun setting on their hopes for Israel's redemption, Cleopas and his companion are forced to acknowledge their vulnerability, their fear and their shattered dreams on that dusty highway between Jerusalem and Emmaus. And yet it is precisely in that moment of pain, fear and anxiety that Jesus comes alongside them, opens up the scriptures again, and reminds them afresh of the very foundations of their hope. The disciples hear the great narrative of God's history-altering love from the very lips of love himself.

And when all the scriptures have been unpacked and interpreted, when all the loose ends have finally been tied up, it is through a meal, a meal that has sustained the faithful for 2000 years that Christ is fully revealed: Today even in our physical detachment, through the gift of social media, we are still able to witness and celebrate the presence of Christ through the breaking of bread. May each one of us know Christ's constant and consistent loving presence alongside us on the way.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

Tim