

## THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER (A)

Luke 24:13-35

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The Rev. Peter C. Jacobson, STS

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! ***He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***

It is easy to become disillusioned in life. It is fairly easy to become disillusioned with the Church. Speaking quite personally, it is all *too easy* for me to become disillusioned with the Church. The ELCA prevaricates and bishops equivocate regarding basic moral questions — questions on which the scriptures have a clear word and which have long been settled matters, and I become discouraged and disillusioned. And I know I am not alone. I also know that different issues cause disappointment or disillusionment for different people.

A congregation is forced to make difficult decisions and some members become sad and/or they feel alienated or disillusioned. One might feel tempted to withdraw from “organized religion.” I have experienced that temptation, and I know others experience it as well. And some *succumb* to the temptation. They withdraw, perhaps to a TV preacher, or to internet sermons, and they craft their own eclectic, personal spirituality. A spirituality which may — or more likely — may *not*, have much connection to historic Christianity.

But as today’s Gospel makes clear, we *must* gather together, and *be* together as the Church. We *must* break bread together. Because there is no full revelation of Christ, apart from the breaking of bread. The breaking of bread which is our encounter with Jesus — that is the *central constituting act* of the Church. Without it there is no Church. And without it there is no full encounter with Christ.

The Lord is truly risen, but in our Gospel, we find two disciples who don’t yet know it. Cleopas and another are on their way to the village of Emmaus. Now, St. Luke doesn’t tell us *why* the two were going there. Maybe Emmaus was their home, or perhaps they had some business to transact. But in any case, we might guess that they are going to Emmaus to *get away* from the terrible things they have witnessed in Jerusalem.

The teacher they had been following has been defeated, indeed he has been *executed*. The one they had thought was the long-awaited Messiah, has been *crucified* and *buried*. The one they had pinned *all* their hopes on, turns out to be a disappointment—*defeated, crushed*.

Emmaus then, is an escape, a retreat. Hope is gone, and these disciples are leaving Jerusalem. They say, “We *had hoped*.” Hope in the *past tense*—surely one of the saddest conditions.

Now you and I, we are baptized children of God, but we are also still part of the fallen creation. And we experience a good deal of brokenness. And we have a hunger to know that our lives have purpose and meaning. The disciples on the

road to Emmaus embody this hunger, this need in our lives. For them, the crucifixion was a powerful, hope-destroying reality, and the resurrection was but a rumor.

Today's Gospels reminds us that Jesus does not limit his resurrection appearances to those with full confidence in him. Jesus comes to the *disappointed*, the *doubtful*, the *disconsolate*, the *disillusioned*. Jesus comes to those who don't know or understand their Bibles. He comes to those who do not recognize him even when he is walking right there beside them. Jesus comes to those who have given up and are headed back home — which makes this story about the blessedness of brokenness.

These two disciples are joined by Jesus on the road. The one who was crucified *seeks them out*. He walks alongside his grief-stricken disciples, steps matching steps. They *do not* come to him. *He comes to them*.

Yet they do not know him. He alone has the power to make himself known. We read: “*Their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*” Not, “they did not recognize him,” but “their eyes *were kept* from recognizing him.” Whenever you see that passive form of a verb in the Bible, it usually means that *God* is at work. The initiative in revealing Christ Jesus is God's, not ours. It rests in his hands.

Jesus comes and walks with these disciples *in their loss of hope*, and *in their bewilderment*. He asks them to tell their story, and he stays to have dinner with them. Even when he chides them for their weak faith and goes through the scriptures with them, they are still not in a state of full belief. They have yet to recognize him. Only with the breaking of the bread, are their eyes finally opened. And at the moment of recognition, Jesus vanishes from sight.

In a strange way then, the Lord Jesus was *more* with them on their journey — *in their doubt and unbelief* — than when they actually saw and recognized him, and finally believed. And it was only in retrospect that they could discern that their hearts were burning as they were walking and talking on the road. It wasn't until it was all over, that the two disciples understood what had happened to them on the journey.

But isn't that how it typically is? We live our lives forward, but understand them backwards. We don't really know at the time what is happening to us. We have no perspective. We have enough to do just to cope from day to day, or hour to hour. It is only afterwards — sometimes *long* afterwards — that our eyes are opened and we begin to understand our experience.

Eventually we may even be grateful for our sad and disappointing experiences, because we are the better for having been through them. And so we begin to understand the message of Jesus' death and resurrection — glory, *not* in spite of, but rather *through* suffering.

We don't expect to find God in pain. We expect to find him in joy. That was the great discovery the two disciples made on the journey to Emmaus. And

that discover gives meaning to suffering.

Now, meaning in our pain doesn't remove the pain, but it does change our attitude towards it. And in the Gospel, it enables the disciples to turn their lives around. They were going *away* from Jerusalem, *away* from faith. But now, they resume their discipleship, and their ties with the community. Their encounter with Jesus drives them to witness, and to come together again with other disciples.

To return to my initial point, there simply is no Christ revealed outside of "organized religion," no Christ revealed outside of the "organized Church." To have a full encounter with Jesus, there must be the "breaking of bread" — there must be the Eucharist. And where there is no Eucharist, no Communion, no "breaking of bread," there is no Church.

It is only as the disciples sit at the table with Christ, and he breaks the bread — *then they recognize him*. It is as though he is saying to them, and to us: If you seek me, if you want to draw closer to me, here is where you will find me. Not off on your own. No. Only here. In the community gathered around the table. In the bread and wine, broken and poured out — my Body and Blood. In the Eucharist.

In our gathering together around the Lord's Table, we meet our Lord and Messiah. This doesn't mean that all our questions are answered or that all our problems are immediately solved. Some questions cannot be answered, and some problems cannot be solved this side of heaven.

But here, around the table — the *Lord's* table — we encounter forgiveness in the midst of sin. We encounter healing in the midst of brokenness. We encounter hope in the midst of despair. We encounter life in the midst of death.

Because. . . Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.