

Readings: Acts 2:14a,36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35; Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17

The gospel today is about disappointment, about seeing and not seeing. It's about hope. It's about walking with strangers.

Of all the appearance stories in the Gospel accounts, Luke's story about Cleopas and his companion (perhaps his unnamed wife?) who meet the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus may be a favorite. Possibly because it is so human.

It traces the two disciples' despair at the death of Jesus to the joy of knowing that he is still with them. Here we see Cleopas and another—perhaps his wife: Two good human beings have suffered through the Passion and death of Jesus. They had their faith-dream crash into pieces. They follow their natural inclinations to go backward to the familiar. They seem to be headed home to Emmaus. They do this with downcast faces and spirits. Here is the lived tension for them: They trusted the teachings of Jesus, His friendship and invitations and then he went out as a loser. Now they were walking along trying patch it all back together by themselves.

Jesus comes alongside them but as a stranger. They fail to recognize who he is. That's a big part of the story because they will recognize Him later. Jesus plays it simple. He asks, "What are you talking about? Why are you debating? Tell me about it."

They rehearsed the story for Him of what they had been talking about:

"We had hoped that He would redeem Israel."

There are not many more poignant, pathetic lines in the New Testament than that one. Not, "we hope" but "we had hoped."

The resulting conversation becomes a little scripture review. Luke says, "Then, starting with Moses and all the prophets [Jesus] interprets for them every passage of scripture that referred to himself". But Cleopas and his traveling companion are still so "slow-witted" – as Luke puts it – that they do not recognize the risen Jesus until he shares bread with them.

In the other readings for today from Acts and I Peter we hear something of this same review of faith by the early church. Some scholars think I Peter was written at least 50 years after establishing the early Jerusalem community and that the Luke/Acts narrative was written sometime into the 2nd Century. That said, what is significant about them is that a new understanding of the meaning of the Old Testament scriptures transformed the first Christian community's view of Jesus' suffering and death.

To this couple, Jesus was dead and his death had completely destroyed their hopes that he would be Israel's traditional Messiah. Jesus dispelled their disillusionment by opening their minds to the scriptures.

Apparently, they couldn't get enough. When they arrived at Emmaus they wanted to hear more. The story teller tells us that they said that it was getting to be late evening. They invited him to stay with them. Now comes the breaking open of the puzzle. It says that they sat down at table. He sat. He took bread. He blessed it. He broke it. He offered it.

In that act, the gospel reports, they had their eyes opened. They recognized Him. They see the Jesus who healed brokenness. They see the Jesus who washed their feet and carried the cross. For the first time they experienced the limits of death in the presence of this living one. They saw that love is stronger than death, that the power of God is greater than the power of forces that would thwart life. Hope became a living presence among them.

Then, Jesus disappears. Still the couple celebrates, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us."

In that I hear something of Wesley's "heart strangely warmed" as he said yes to God's call to mission.

I hear a murmur about a glowing ember waiting for the strong wind of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost to blow it into a living fire.

I hear a couple's affirmation of whose they are and of their mission to tell others that Jesus is alive.

So I'm wondering.....

Who in the story do you identify with?

In what ways are Cleopas & his companion like your experience?

Have you ever been as the Stranger in someone's life?

What part of the story connects with your story?

As individuals and as the church community we too have experienced disappointment about our hopes and expectations. We and our friends have not been saved from the tragedies that accompany our human lives. And we try to walk away from Jerusalem, from the place of suffering in our lives, and try to make sense of the pain in our lives. Like the disciples, all us eventually travel the Road to Emmaus .

During those times, I suspect that we often do not recognize Jesus in the stranger that comes to us. Our fears and our expectations often blind our recognition of them. We have a difficult time trusting that we will be heard, that our deepest longings can be attended to, that our wounds can be

healed and the pain of life can be redeemed. Still, the gospel affirms the Stranger does come to us. The Stranger comes to remind us of whose we are and what we are supposed to be doing.

We like Cleopas and his companion can invite the Stranger to walk with us, even before we recognize him or her as God's presence. The stranger who comes to us might have to be trusted in some other form before this deeper recognition can take place.

In addition, we ourselves can offer ourselves to be the "Stranger" in other people's lives. The one who offers the presence of God who living in us to the other in listening, gentle confrontation, caring compassion and or acts of service.

Macrina Miederkehr (*Seasons of Your Heart*) reflects:

"The road to Emmaus is not a road of the past  
It is an everyday road  
Someone is still walking along beside us  
explaining the scripture to us  
Breaking bread with us  
And then vanishing from our sight."

....

"We long to recognize Christ before we trust the stranger he sends down our road,  
And so often we miss the blessing.  
It is not that we're on the wrong road.  
It is rather that we fail to trust and recognize strangers  
The road we walk each day is the road to Emmaus."

She continues:

"Listening to this amazing story I nodded in agreement  
Yes, I know It happens at table the world over  
We sit down as strangers  
Strangers in our own household  
Yet when we eat together the possibility remains  
"Someday we will leave as friends  
We will drop our masks of fear and recognize each other for the first time.  
How can we hand bread to one another and remain the same.

"We have all been to our crosses  
We've had our burials  
We've been to the empty tomb.  
Always it is our fear that scatters us turning us into strangers.  
Some day we will understand  
that the stranger sitting next to us could be our salvation.

"Meanwhile we keep clutching our fear to our breasts like a cherished child.  
Smothered beneath all that fear  
Love waits.  
Someday when our hands reach for the bread our hearts will touch  
And then we will know our foolishness  
We will recognize each other at last  
Our fears will flee away  
We will be scattered strangers no longer  
Anything can happen  
When you share a meal!"

That is what Easter is about. The Stranger is still with us. If we say we had hoped He would redeem us, we can change that now to say that hope is present among us and we, too, can know Him in the breaking of the bread and in the gathering of our company. *Amen.*