

EASTER THREE, YEAR A, APRIL 23, 2023

Where do you go when life gets you down? Where do you go when you just want to scream from the pressures of life? Where do you go when you're feeling lonely, depressed or just plain need a break? We probably all have different ways or even places we go just to get away from it all.

This morning's Gospel is about two people, probably good friends, walking down the road together - walking away from something more than walking towards something else. Remember it is only a couple of days since the crucifixion of Jesus, and it is Sunday evening of the day of resurrection and there are all these wild rumors about the tomb and the disappearance of Jesus' body. Cleopas and his friend are most likely heading out of town on a walk to nowhere. They need a break from the tension of grief and the drama of the past couple of days; so they take a walk to a place called Emmaus, which means "warm springs," maybe to sit in some hot water and rejuvenate their bodies and their spirits.

While they were walking and discussing together, Luke tells us that Jesus drew near and began to walk with them but they didn't recognize him." When you think about it that isn't all that strange as how many times do you see someone out of context and you don't know who they are. So the three had an intense conversation on the walk to Emmaus and the disciples told the stranger all that had happened in Jerusalem the last several days. The stranger responded to the news by interpreting the scriptures to them. But they still didn't recognize him! Perhaps it was because they were still so consumed with grief.

Frederick Buechner a theologian/writer asserts that Emmaus was not so much a place as a state of mind." The state of mind is escape - escape from pain, loneliness, longing, sorrow, bewilderment, and grief. It is the place where we spend much of our lives, the place in our lives where we are likely to say, "Let the whole thing go to hell, it makes no difference anyway." The road to Emmaus is that place where we go to escape whatever it is we need to escape - whether it is our job, our friends, our family, or that horrible gnawing grief over life and love lost.

So I believe this story known as the Road to Emmaus was told and remembered and cherished by the early Christian community because they understood this story to be a great help in understanding Easter. This story is not meant to answer "how did God raise Jesus from the dead?" Rather this story deals with the question of how Easter gets to us or how Easter gets in us.

In this story the resurrection gets personal. It tells us that God is a God of action; constantly bringing new life from old. Look at it this way. Two relatively unknown followers of Jesus are trudging along a dusty road when suddenly the risen Christ joins them incognito on their journey. By the time they reach the end of their journey, they have moved from discouragement and despair to hope and renewed faith. The first readers of this gospel would have wept with joy to have read this story because they would recognize that this road on which these disciples were walking was not simply the road to Emmaus, it was the road or way of renewed hope and life.

The road to Emmaus was for them a symbol of the Christian life. The early Christians were first called the "people of the road," or the people of the way, and in this story there was embedded a promise: if you want to experience the resurrection of

Jesus in your life, get up in the morning and put one foot in front of the other and head down the road. Stop being fearful of everyone and everything. Follow the way.

When you follow the way of love, forgiveness, grace, inclusivity, it is into these moments of life that Christ is likely to enter - when life is most real and inescapable. God's grace does not usually come in a blaze of heavenly light or the sudden revelation of a dream or even in the midst of worship - God's grace falls in on us in the midst of the supper table or walking down the road, trying to get away. God's grace falls in on us in the midst of the everyday and ordinary moments, in the plain and simple struggles to understand, in the middle of common conversations on long walks, during phone calls and driving in the car to go to the grocery store.

The sacred moments of our lives are the everyday moments in which we can learn to open our spiritual eyes and see the redeeming grace of God moving along the road with us. The road, the conversation, the meal, the friends, even the stranger - all ordinary are made incredible through the grace of God.

So it wasn't all that unusual that it took sitting down to a meal together before their eyes were opened. They only recognized him when he stopped speaking and teaching and started doing. And the thing that he started doing, that enabled them to recognize him, was breaking something and giving it to them. Yes, it was bread but it was so much more. It was an important gesture.

Brokenness is a vital part of Christian experience because it strips away all the layers of our psyche and reveals the real person that's underneath. That's why Jesus aligned himself with the company of social outcasts so much because they were broken and vulnerable people who had no veneer left. They used their energy to simply survive. It was in their brokenness, their vulnerability, their being outcasts that they saw Jesus for who he really was.

Recently, I read about two paintings by the artist Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez simply called "The Kitchen Maid". One hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago and the other in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. Both show a servant girl of mixed race, the offspring of a Spanish Christian and an African Muslim, in a kitchen. The kitchen maid was thought to be the only subject in the painting until the Dublin painting was cleaned in 1933. It revealed Jesus and two men in the distant background of the upper left corner. Clearly, the Dublin version was the dinner at Emmaus and not just some domestic scene.

The artist clearly believed that when the men arrived in Emmaus there had to be a woman who served them dinner as they sat at the table. The subject of this painting, then, is a young woman who is marginalized at every level — by her mixed race, religion, gender, and class. While the men speak of spiritual matters in the back, she's hard at work in the kitchen preparing dinner for them.

The painting shows the maid is visibly distracted. In her left hand she holds a ceramic jug of wine as she glances over her right shoulder, clearly eavesdropping on the back room conversation. She is bent over to support herself and there is a stunned expression on her face indicating that her eavesdropping has confirmed her suspicion. She's in a state of disbelief at having recognized the man she's serving.

Whereas the men had been blind to the identity of Jesus even when he was with them for a seven-mile walk, the Moorish maid recognized the risen Christ while working

in the mundane context of a kitchen. This painting exemplifies how Jesus comes to us in the ordinary.

There are many occasions through which we can recognize Jesus. We will each probably recognize him in different ways, through different events just as his disciples did or he may not appear in the way we expect as he didn't for any of the disciples. We may not even be aware that we've been walking with him for neither were the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

But to all those disciples who met Jesus after his resurrection they were changed by the experience. And that's the litmus test of an encounter with the risen Christ. We are changed by it. It radically changes our perspective, the way we view life. We become different people, with different values and different priorities.

To encounter Jesus on the road and see him in the breaking of the bread is to have the courage to live into the resurrected life, the life of wonder, grace, and gratitude. The Emmaus story is about moving from a hardened heart to a grateful heart, moving from excluding the other to including all God's creatures. It's moving from a life without hope to one which is based on that hope.

The brief encounter between Jesus and his friends on the road to Emmaus is a reminder to us that in any moment, in the midst of any experience, the resurrection may be lurking. For us to believe in the resurrection is not something we just haul out on Easter. It is not about intellectualizing it in our heads. To believe in the resurrection is a way of being in the world, a way of living in relation to everything that is in our lives. To believe in the resurrection is a way of receiving all of life, moment by moment by moment, as a gracious gift from a loving creator God. To believe in the resurrection is learning how to trust God to renew life even in the most mundane, ordinary and difficult moments of our living.

So you see the Emmaus story is ours. It really is about us. Embrace it. For it is the moments when we least expect it that we will encounter the Risen Christ. Amen