



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094
(920)261-2570
www.goodshepherdwi.org

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

May 4, 2014

“On the Road to Emmaus”

(Luke 24:30-31)

Rev. David K. Groth

“When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24:30-31).

Collect of the Day

O God, through the humiliation of Your Son You raised up the fallen world. Grant to Your faithful people, rescued from the peril of everlasting death, perpetual gladness and eternal joys; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

Years ago, when Grandpa died, after the funeral and the committal, the family gathered at the farm. We changed into more comfortable clothing. We disbursed and did our own thing for a time, walking and talking. Later that evening, dad brought out the wash tub and filled it with drinks and ice and Uncle Dave fired up the grill and unwrapped the brats, and Uncle Richard . . . well, he just sat around and supervised. And when all was ready we squeezed everyone into the dining room and ate and told stories and laughed together and cried a little.

That's an important part of the funeral, isn't it? It's an important part of grieving, to sit down and break bread together. Usually it happens in the church basements of thousands of parishes across the land. And truth be told, I never grow tired of that part, the creamed turkey sandwiches downstairs, and the cheese and sausage platter, and all that jello, and the seven layer salad paved over with mayonnaise and more cheese and bacon . . . but at least you can tell yourself you had your veggie. And then, at the end of the table, an embarrassment of desserts . . . and more coffee. It's part of how we grieve. "Here . . . eat something. It will make you feel better." And there's some truth to that. Food is more than fuel. Particularly, after the funeral, when we sit down and break bread together it has something to do with the affirmation of life, and the hope of eternal life, and the communion of saints.

And so it was that two followers of Jesus found themselves sitting at table sharing the evening meal with a stranger. It was the first day of the week after his sudden, cruel

execution by the Roman authorities. Jesus had died. There was no doubt about that. And with him had died the hope and fledgling faith of his disciples and his followers. Up until that Friday, there was a growing sense that what he said was true, that he was, in fact, the Truth, that in his presence they were somehow in the presence of God. All that ended, however, when they saw him dead on a cross.

Of course a few of the women were claiming his tomb was empty, and were even claiming to have seen him alive. But lots of people do that; they see visions of the one they miss the most, so how trustworthy can their testimony be. For the most part, the followers of Jesus don't buy it and are still grieving his death.

Two of them go on a walk. They're trying to wrap their arms around the events of the previous days: his betrayal and arrest, the horror of his crucifixion. Jesus is dead and they are grieving his loss, but they're also grieving the resumption of the meaningless reality of their lives without him.

As they walk, a stranger catches up to them. It is Jesus. Curiously, they do not recognize him. The text says "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Don't let that trouble you. That's no big deal for God, right? It is God who gives us eyes to see and brains for facial recognition. If he wants, he can turn that switch off. In fact he does that to me all the time, or so I would like to think!

In any event, the stranger asks them what they're talking about. They hesitate. My sense is they don't particularly want to include him, and one of them, Cleopas, is a little short with him. "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know about the things that happened there?" (Cleopas has no clue with whom he is talking.) "What things?" the stranger asks. They start off reluctantly, but a trickle turns into a gush. They tell him everything, including this, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." "We had hoped". That's in the past tense. Pluperfect, which means they're no longer hoping for that. Their hopes have been dashed.

That's when the stranger lets them have it. "O foolish ones" he says, "so slow to believe! Didn't the prophets of old say it would happen this way?"

The stranger sighs the sad sigh of a teacher going over material that should have been learned long before. V. 27, ". . . beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

As they draw near to Emmaus, with the sun beginning to set, the two extend hospitality to the stranger, inviting him to stay with them and share the evening meal. He accepts, and, when he is at table with them, he takes the bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them." And that act flicks the switch back on again. It was reminiscent of the way Jesus had done that many times before, but so memorably on the night of his arrest, at the Last Supper. Vs. 31, "Their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

I love this story. I love how the two on the road related the account of what happened to Jesus so honestly and accurately, including the resurrection, but without a lot of passion. They are not convinced. They have the information, but it hasn't made any difference to them. They have the bare facts of his crucifixion and resurrection, but there's no faith there, no passion, no commitment, no brave devotion. And I think that's where a lot of people are. They have the framework, just not the faith. They know the words of Christianity, but not the reality of it, and the joy. They're going to need Scripture interpreted and made relevant to them, like Jesus did for those two on the road. They're going to need you to do that for them . . . **or** at least invite them and bring to a place where that can happen.

When's the last time you've done that? Know anyone who might be able to learn something from Mr. Wille's Bible Study who understands Scripture and knows how to teach? Know anyone who might benefit from the teaching and preaching of a wise and winsome New Testament professor, Dr. Paavola, who reads ancient Greek faster than I read English, yet somehow still has a good sense

of humor?

This story continues to assure me that faith is a gift given by God, but usually through other people: a Sunday School teacher, a pastor, a parent or grandparent, a friend who brings another friend to church. Faith is not something you can force or coerce on others, or on yourself, for that matter. Faith is a gift that God works through his Word. But that Word is usually brought to us by someone else.

And I love this story for the fact that Jesus is not going after a massive crowd here, is he? It just two guys. And these two guys are not Pilate and his boss, Caesar Tiberius. These two guys on the road to Emmaus are not the movers and shakers. One of them is named Cleopas, (and we don't know anything about him) and the other is anonymous. He's going after two ordinary guys who were slow to believe. That's of no interest to us . . . unless you happen to be an ordinary guy (or woman) who is sometimes slow to believe. Then, this is very Good News. For you know he cares about you, and your faith, and your salvation.

And I love the fact that in this account the risen Christ comes to two men in the midst of an ordinary, very human activity: taking and walking, dealing with a terrible loss. These guys weren't looking for him. They weren't praying for his special revelation. They were not in the throes of some religious vision, or in the emotional frenzy of some kind of revival. Faith, this story suggests, does not come as a result of our intense intellectual or emotional search we make. Faith is not a decision we make. Faith is a gift. It comes from outside of ourselves. Faith is what happens when, God, by his good grace, opens our hearts and minds to the truth of his Word. So far as I can see, inviting the stranger to stay for dinner is the only thing these guys did right. The rest of it was all grace . . . all the work of Jesus.

And I love how God's Son reveals himself in ordinary ways to ordinary people. Notice the venues. This appearance of the risen Lord is not taking place in the Temple of Jerusalem, but rather on some dusty road, which means when you're on the road today talking to someone in

the car, that too can be holy ground. And the table at which he breaks the bread . . . it's not in a five star French restaurant. It's in someone's house in a village called Emmaus, which makes your table fair game for his presence as well.

And notice: he doesn't come to these two in a blaze of unearthly light. He comes as a man who listens to their story but also pulls them back into Scripture. “. . . beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” There's no hocus pocus here. . . just Scripture. Remember, that's what he did when the devil was tempting him in the wilderness. He responded to each temptation with the refrain, “It is written . . .” referring to Scripture. You know, you and I are often embarrassed by Scripture. But if it was good enough for him, it's good enough for us.

God reveals himself in ordinary ways to ordinary people. He instituted Holy Baptism. What can be more accessible to us than water? And what is more necessary for life? Some of us might assume (or might have been given the impression) that unless we've had a luminous religious experience, then we're really not a genuine Christian. Unless you can speak in tongues, or point to the time and place when God knocked you off your feet, causing you to commit your life to him and be born again, unless you've experienced the *power* of God, then you're just a second rate Christian who is sadly trapped in dead religious tradition. I can tell you when I was born again: it was August 22, 1965 when Pastor Wilke applied water to my head three times at that font in St. Peter's, Helenville, Wisconsin. I don't remember a thing about it, and that's okay . . . because God does. That's when he wrote down my name in his book of life. Being born again by the Spirit, that's the Lord's work, not the baby's. It's not about us dedicating ourselves to him. It's about God coming down and cleansing us of sin and adopting us as his own redeemed children.

God reveals himself in ordinary ways to ordinary people. And so he also instituted his Supper, in which he

locates himself in, with and under the bread and wine, for us, for our forgiveness. We don't have to go to some remote corner of heaven to find him. We don't have to fly to the far East and pay some guru to find him. No, he comes to us right here, today, in the bread and wine. "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given."

The sacred moments are most found in the everyday moments, for the risen Lord refuses to be boxed into his heaven. Two grieving friends walk along a dusty road, and a stranger joins them and listens to them and reminds them of what is written in Scripture and those two are changed, not by the walk, but by the Word. And later that evening, as he took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them, that's when God chose to open their eyes. They recognized him, and any lingering grief is replaced with joy. "And he vanished from their sight." His work there with them was done for now.

And now their work, begins. That same hour, they set off into the darkness, and hightail it back to Jerusalem. They find the eleven, and the first words out of their mouths are, and I quote, "The Lord is risen indeed . . ." (v. 34)! Amen.

