

# The Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter

The Rev. Peter J. Van Hook

April 6, 2008

## The Gospel

That very day, the first day of the week, two of the disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. **Luke 24:13-35**

I have been doing consulting in church leadership for about twenty years. Sometimes I have focused on church growth, sometimes on conflict resolution, sometimes on leadership issues. One of the interesting dynamics is how consistent the difference is in the perspective of clergy and laity about the life of their congregation. The gospel reading for this morning illustrates one of the interesting differences. If one asks lay persons what their favorite story from the New Testament is you will get a wide variety of answers, with virtually no correlation with denomination or age or anything else. But if you ask *clergy* what their favorite passage from the New Testament is something more than  $\frac{2}{3}$ — $\frac{2}{3}$ !—will say it is the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. I suspect that it has something to do with the multiple stories within the story, each one having something to do with relationships, each one having something to say about life in the church—which I suspect is why the story was remembered and preserved by our forebears in the faith.

Some of the themes are familiar.

- ❖ The story proclaims not only that Jesus the Lord is risen from the dead, but that in his resurrected being he can transcend the normal boundaries of time and space (this is the afternoon of the day of resurrection, with the core group of disciples gathered in that closed room listening to the startling story of the women who had visited the tomb that morning).
- ❖ The story states unequivocally that Jesus is known *both* in the word—that is, in the stories of the church’s proclamation—and in the breaking of the bread, the sacramental life of the church. “Did not our hearts burn within us...while he was opening the scriptures to us?” ask the disciples. And it is at the moment of the blessing of the simple meal of bread and wine that he is more visually revealed to them.
- ❖ The story lets us in on a secret that religious professionals do not often want you to know: the disciples are not on retreat, they are not running a food bank, they are not in deep meditation or earnest contemplation of theology but *just walking down the road talking*. I cannot emphasize the point enough: Jesus comes to us often when we are most unawares, and in the guise of something familiar and everyday, and at moments of dejection or despair.

There is another part of the story that I rarely hear explicated. The fact of the story is that these two disciples, though not of the inner circle of those we come to know as Apostles, are nonetheless *disciples*, clearly identified as two men who were close to Jesus, so well known to the early Christian community that the name of one of them is clearly remembered. Cleopas is not mentioned before this incident, nor is he mentioned anywhere afterward; still, it is as if he is as familiar to the story teller as you are to me. Now this is the subtle point: these two are escapees. Unlike the Apostles these two have escaped from the threat growing up in Jerusalem from the local authorities in the wake of the crucifixion of Jesus their leader. Instead of staying in hiding they have skipped town, probably leaving right after breakfast on Sunday morning, the time to walk from the city to Emmaus being just about right to place them in this spot in late mid-day. Luke’s description of their conversation, “...they were talking and discussing...,” is understated to say the least. Undoubtedly part of their conversation was what they planned to do next, in order to pick up their lives from where they had been nailed to the reality of the cross.

And so, Jesus comes to them, these two deserters of the group that had followed Jesus for so many months. Jesus comes to them, these two bewildered, uncomprehending men who are simply trying to get away.

And then comes the final point of the story. The encounter with Jesus leads them back into the fellowship, not away from it. The revelation of the risen lord causes them not to sit in awe and wonder but to hightail it back to the community of faith, reconstituted from the scattered, frightened women and men into the apostolic band that will spread the Good News starting from Jerusalem.

For me the good news in this story is that there remains a fellowship of the risen Lord to which I can return when things get tough. The good news is that in those moments of isolation and fear when Jesus comes to me in one guise or another there is a place where he continues to be found and known in the reading of the scriptures and the breaking of the bread. The good news is that around here that place is called Shepherd of the Mountains Lutheran Church.