

A Sermon for DaySpring

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Burning Hearts

Luke 24: 13-35

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Those women...they must be crazy. It's just a stupid rumor. No way. That couldn't happen.

That is what people said when Mary, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene proclaimed that Christ was alive and had risen. Along with Salome, tradition calls these women "The Myrrh Bearers." Mary Magdalene is also called "The Apostle to the Apostles." For they were the first to preach and proclaim the good news of the resurrection. All of this is four verses before we get to today's passage.

Most disciples, however, were very slow to believe. These two that we find on the road to Emmaus, are no different. They are filled with doubt and disbelief. These alleged reports of Jesus being alive just had to be rumors. Truth be told, it does defy all logic. A Resurrection? That really is outlandish!

Maybe, though, they are not ready to hear it. Or, is it possible that they need to see for themselves? Sometimes it is so hard to believe what you have not experienced. And so, these two disciples, having not experienced it, leave Jerusalem and head home, confused and sad.

With their heads hung low, they mull over the last couple of days. Their friend and teacher, the one they had put their hope in, was murdered as a spectacle. Tragedy often results in second-guessing and accusations and blaming. It can bring out the worst in all of us. On this particular journey, these two processed all of that: the violence of their world and maybe even their own failures. Had they flaked? Were they even by Christ's side during his crucifixion? Their hopes are dismantled, and they question all that they believe. Shame and hopelessness envelop them.

And then, a stranger joins them on the road. He hears their pain, and he holds their questions. Their world has been turned upside down. "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel," they say. In vulnerability, they pour out their hearts to Christ, the stranger. Even as he listens and teaches as he did so many times before, they do not recognize him.

It's a curious thing that God shows up on this doubt-filled road to Emmaus. Why would God do that? If Jesus could show up in any way and in any place, why would it be on a dusty, lonely road with this small, confused lot? The first encounters after the resurrection are with two lesser disciples, who didn't even stay in Jerusalem to search for the missing Lord.

The risen Christ could have dropped in on a service in the Temple and blown the minds of his persecutors who had been in the crowd. The risen Christ could have stopped by the chief priests and the Pharisees' committee meeting and showed them just what they had missed and how they had gotten it wrong. As a mother, I like to think the risen Christ could have stopped by his mother's house. Christ could go where he might get the biggest bang for his buck, so to say. Where his appearance might reach the most people or make the biggest impression, like a wedding or a hillside with 5,000 people or even healing the multitudes. Seems like a missed opportunity to impact the masses. Maybe it's a public relations blunder to not roll out the resurrection announcement in a big and expedient way.

But instead, the Resurrection found two travelers who had lost hope, on a dusty road to nowhere. We do not know anything about Emmaus, but that it was seven miles away. All we know is that it is away from all the action in Jerusalem. These two have left the community of the other disciples, and they seem to be headed in the wrong direction.

One disciple is named Cleopas and the other companion is unnamed. We do not even know if it is a man or a woman. It may be his son; maybe it is his wife. Or, . . . it may be you. It may be me. It is an invitation from the author of Luke, for each of us to find ourselves in the story. We are the unnamed disciple. In our doubt and distress, when we cannot see hope, Christ accompanies us and walks with us, too.

Christ, the Resurrection, finds these two disciples and meets them where they are. They don't have to have the perfect faith. They are not even really searching for Christ at this moment. The disciples do not have all the answers and in fact, they have a laundry list of shortcomings . . . as we all do. Their faith faltered and doubt has set in. They are distracted and burdened by guilt and shame. Their losses have exposed their own brokenness. But, this, this is exactly where God likes to show up.

God often shows up in these hard and human spaces of pain and lostness:

God takes dry bones and barren wombs and breathes new life.

God ministers to the parched souls of Hagar and Elijah when they thought they were dying in the desert.

The Good Shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to go after the one who is missing.

The welcoming father receives the prodigal son with open arms.

God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

The thirsty Christ meets the outcast Samaritan woman at the well, giving her living water.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Christ goes out of his way to pass through the land of the Gerasene's to heal a tormented man.

Jesus weeps with Mary and Martha over the death of Lazarus.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Come to me all who are weary, and I will give you rest, he says.

This is what God does. This is where God meets us. God joins us in our brokenness.

Like the disciples, we do not always notice **that it is** Christ who is walking with us. In our disillusionment and distraction, it can be hard to see and understand. As Jesus walks with them on the lonely Emmaus Road, he opens the Scriptures to them and points them back to God. He reminds them of what they know and what they have learned. In these familiar acts of listening, encouraging, and teaching, they still do not recognize Jesus. However, inside of them, there seems to be a hunger growing for more, and so they extend hospitality to the stranger, as Christ taught them to do. They open their hearts once again, saying, "Stay with us. It is almost evening."

Inside the home, a table is prepared. Where two or three are gathered in God's name, he is there. Sitting in fellowship, a new communion begins. The stranger-turned-guest now takes and breaks and blesses, then gives the bread. So ordinary, so obvious. At once they understand. What was obscured is revealed. Hope is driving the hopelessness away. Eyes are open, and they recognize that Christ has been with them all along. Their thick-hearted hearts are ignited. Hindsight is 20/20, isn't it. We all wish we had it at times. Now, they can see and understand that a new creation is unfolding, being birthed right in front of them. Even Christ was a new creation – he wasn't the same after the suffering of the cross.

After finally experiencing the Resurrection, for themselves, their hearts are enflamed with God's love. They say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he opened the Scriptures to us?" I'm reminded of our friend Kurt who told us *It only takes a spark to get a fire going and soon all those around will warm up to its glowing.*

God's love is like a fire – a fire that enflames the hearts of his followers. It's a fire that illuminates the darkness and sparks passions for justice and righteousness. It's a fire that burns away all distraction that is not of God. As St. Ambrose puts it, God's love has wings like a fire that "makes better whatever it has touched." Moving from disillusionment to joy in the breaking of bread, these two disciples now return to Jerusalem to share this burning love with their brothers and sisters, who are still weighed down in their hopelessness.

So we see in this encounter, Christ reveals God's work and presence in Scripture and fills their hearts. In the breaking of bread at this first meal, they are changed by the Resurrection, and the Holy Spirit is at work, igniting a fire of love from within. We have Word and Table and Spirit. These are the three elements needed for the beginning of the church and Luke continues that in his next work in the book of Acts.

And this is still where we meet the resurrected Christ today: in Scripture, in our Communion together as we take the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and in the gift of the Holy Spirit in community, as the Holy Spirit accompanies us on the way as we meet each other in shared hospitality.

Where the roads of doubt and shattered hopes intersect, Christ is there. As co-travelers, we share these journeys together. We open our hearts, and Christ kindles the flame of God's love within. This is a love that leads to repentance and witness. This is a love that extends grace and shares the bread of life. This is a love that reconciles and forgives. It is a love that sets boundaries and cares for neighbors extravagantly. It is a love that marks the life of a Christian as radical and different. This love opens to the slow and transforming work of the Spirit of God.

Maybe, at times, it does feel like Christ is aa stranger. And the losses of life can weigh us down. As we walk our journeys, we help each other see and recognize how Christ is already accompanying us.

Friends, this is the invitation: That we open our hearts to the One who is Resurrection. We open our hearts to Christ who finds us and claims a new creation in and through suffering. Because of the resurrection, there is a way for divine companionship and a hope that reorients our lives. In Christ, the burden of our past and the weight of sin and shame are lifted. In this life with Christ, we open our hearts to God's holy and burning love.

May it be so in all of us. Amen.

