

Easter 3A Sermon 040608

Acts 2:14a,36-41; Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17

1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

In the name of the resurrected Christ, Amen.

A priest was driving through the deepest, most back wood part of Southeast Texas. He stopped at a one-pump gas station. Seeing that the priest had one arm in a cast, the proprietor of the station came out to help him fill his car. As he started pumping the gas, Bubba, in his overalls and gimme cap said, “Why are you dressed like that?” “I’m a Roman Catholic priest,” came the reply. “What happened to your arm?” asked Bubba. “I fell in the bathroom and broke it against the commode.” said the priest. When Bubba went into the station to get the priest’s change, Billy Joe Bob – sitting inside– said, “Why is he dressed like that?” “He’s a Roman Catholic priest.” said Bubba. “What happened to his arm?” asked Billy Joe Bob. “He broke it on the commode.” “What’s a commode?” asked Billy Joe Bob. “How in world should I know?” said Bubba, “I’m a Baptist, not a Roman Catholic.”

The road to Emmaus story carries a lot of meaning with it. The United Methodist Church version of the spiritual renewal program Cursillo is, in fact called the Walk to Emmaus. People often concentrate on the spiritual opening of the disciples’ eyes in this story, on their going from blindness to sight through the breaking of the bread and opening of Scripture. But maybe there is more for us to consider as we walk toward

Emmaus this morning. So, like good reporters, let's dig into this story a bit and try to find the "who, why and where" of it all.

As far as the "who" of this story goes, we don't know much of anything about these disciples, travelling the road that day. We know that one is named Cleopas, but we don't even have a name for the other. We know that they were in Jerusalem when Jesus suffered the Passion and the crucifixion, or at least we know that they know Jesus' story; and because of the end of this passage, we know that they knew the 11 disciples and the women who were Jesus' inner circle. But other than these few facts, Cleopas and the other disciple are virtually unknown to us. And this is the only time in all the Bible where this character Cleopas appears, what do we make of that? We know so little about them that they could be *anybody*. And maybe that's the message in their identities – or lack thereof. These disciples who met Jesus on the road and had no idea who he was, could be *any* disciples; could be any of *us*.

Why were they on the road that day? They left Jerusalem on what would turn out to be Easter day. The women had already gone to the tomb, found it empty and had returned to the other disciples and reported their encounter with angels. But remember from earlier in this Chapter, Luke tells us that the disciples did not believe the women and thought they were telling idle tales. So for these disciples, Jesus was still dead – and now his body was missing as well – and everything they had believed in had been taken away. The Messiah – the Christ – the one they had called "the Son of God," had been

arrested and taken away like a common criminal, and had been summarily executed. “How could that happen to a true Messiah?” they must have wondered. So they left Jerusalem, disappointed, dejected and downtrodden. All they could do was walk and complain about how badly things had gone.

Where were they going? We don’t know. We know they were on the road near Emmaus, but we don’t even know where that village was located. Luke tells us that Emmaus was approximately 7 miles from Jerusalem. From the early Church on – and especially during the Crusades – people have tried to determine exactly where Emmaus was, but none has been able to do so, definitively. So why Emmaus? Why not Bethsaida – or Nazareth? Perhaps for the same reason we know so little about these disciples. Emmaus could be anywhere.

Have you ever gone anywhere just to get away from something? Maybe that’s what’s happening in this story. The disciples have just suffered what was probably the biggest disappointment of their lives. If they were like the others, they had given up everything they owned and everything they knew, just to follow Jesus. And now all that seemed to have gone up in smoke – leaving them empty and wondering what to do next. So they walked down the road, away from what had happened, not necessarily *to* anywhere, just *away* from what had happened.

The wonderful writer, Frederick Buechner, in his book, The Magnificent Defeat, said,

Emmaus is where we go when life gets to be too much for us; ... the place we go in order to escape – a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, ‘Let the whole ... thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.’ ... Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. ... Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred; that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had – ideas about love and freedom and justice – have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends.

Emmaus ... where is it for you? It may not be the same every time you need it. It may change, depending upon how deep or how bad your hurt is. Something like being disappointed that you didn't get the recognition you thought you would at work, may simply be a trip to Emmaus by way of Ben and Jerry's, of Bluebell. But the loss of a job, a serious illness, or the loss of a loved one, might require the purchase of a Harley in order to get away. We all need to get away from life's bad news sometimes. But lest you think I'm advocating answering every one of life's disappointments and hurts by giving in to our narcissistic need to make ourselves feel better – or at least feel less, remember how today's story ends.

Cleopas and his buddy meet a stranger on the road – and His teaching of the Gospel story, complete with an understanding of how it fits in with the Old Testament, sets their hearts on fire. And then, when they share Holy Eucharist with this stranger, they discover that He is the Risen Lord – and they run back to Jerusalem, in the dark, to share the news with all the other believers.

Now we know that “who,” the “where” and the “why” – but what’s the moral of this story? Simply this: it is human to suffer disappointment, pain and setbacks in this life. Those things are as unavoidable over the course of a lifetime as is tomorrow’s sunrise. And when those things happen, often we need an Emmaus – and oasis – through which we can temporarily block out the pain and let the loss sink in before we start to heal. BUT ... and this is the real point here ... we need to raise our eyes from the road to Emmaus so that we don’t miss the fact that Jesus is walking next to us. Jesus – the risen Lord – is *always* on the road with us. That’s the one thing He promised us – I will be with you always, even to the end of the age. And when we have had enough of walking away from our pain, Jesus is there to reignite the fire in our hearts – to turn us from looking inward and trying to lose our pain, to looking outward and upward toward the Good News of the Gospel.

If Jesus’ resurrection story tells us anything, it is that there is hope – even in loss, even in death. There is the hope that can only come from the God who loved us enough to send His Son to suffer death for our sins, and then to make that Son rise from the dead to walk with us each and every time we need to find Emmaus.

Amen.