

3rd Sunday of Easter 2011

The Story of the road to Emmaus

Christ is risen! Today, as we continue to reflect on, and celebrate, and be challenged by the good news of Jesus' resurrection, we listened to Luke's story of what happened on the road to Emmaus.

Two disciples of Jesus- Clopas and presumably his wife Mary- are walking on Sunday morning from Jerusalem to the nearby village of Emmaus. Luke has just told us that other women disciples of Jesus had earlier come back from the tomb of Jesus and told the apostles that there they had met two men in dazzling white who told them that Jesus was risen from the dead. Luke tells us, however, that this seemed to the apostles to be an "idle tale" and they did not believe them.

So, two of the disciples- Clopas and Mary- leave the group and wend their way towards Emmaus. They are disheartened and confused, their hopes have been shattered, and they have no clue as to what to do next. Jesus' disciples had come to believe that through Jesus God was finally "redeeming" Israel, ending the exile, and renewing the covenant. But His crucifixion spelled the end of that. His death was the complete and final devastation of their hopes- it meant that the exile was not over, that Israel's sins had not been forgiven, and the pagans were still in control. The thirst for God's light and truth to come and lead His people was still unfulfilled. Jesus' execution meant that they had mistaken all the signs, and now there was even further confusion- reports of a missing body and a vision of angels. The two disciples, as they walk along, are in deep

sorrow and a state of real disappointment as they talk about what had happened. This was not the way it was supposed to have ended!

Then this mysterious Stranger joins them along the way. And he quite nonchalantly joins in on their conversation. The two disciples begin recounting what had recently taken place and how they had hoped that Jesus would have been the one to redeem Israel, but that the religious establishment had gotten rid of them. They're surprised that this guy hadn't heard about what had happened in Jerusalem over the week-end. Then the Stranger begins to *re-tell* Israel's story to the two disciples. He says that the prophets pointed into the gloom and declared that it would be *through* the darkness and suffering that redemption would come. In other words, He tell them that the real story was not about how Israel would beat up its enemies, but how the covenant God would bring His saving purposes for the world through the suffering and vindication of Israel and Israel's Messiah. Jesus' execution was not the end of hope for Israel, but the means by which God would defeat evil once and for all.

The question He poses to them was, in effect: Suppose this is what God's light and truth look like, coming unexpectedly to lead His people back into His presence. Suppose God is not operating in the way you anticipated? Suppose you're not reading the story in the right way? Suppose you got everything backwards, and God really was doing His thing through the events of the last few days? The Stranger is telling the old story of Israel, beginning with Moses and the prophets, but telling it in a new and unexpected way. The disciples don't really get what He is saying, but something is happening to them as He tells them His alternative story, something is touching them. Later, they will

say to each other, “And did not our hearts burn within us as He opened up for us the scriptures!”

As they get close to Emmaus, the two disciples invite the Stranger to come in and stay the night with them- a kind and a generous offer. But in the house, something even stranger happens than what had occurred on the road- the Stranger becomes the host. As they begin to share a meal together, He takes bread, blesses it, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. And then. . . then. . . they recognize Him. But He is gone. Their hearts had been burning within them as He explained *the alternative story*. It was the breaking of the bread that finally opened their eyes, as well as their hearts.

Somewhere along the road, God’s light and truth had led them back, had led them back into His presence from their valley of despair, and their sorrow began to change. Then in that moment of disclosure at the Table, they began to see. And despite the lateness of the night, they get up and return to Jerusalem to find the others and to tell what had happened.

I find this to be one of the most powerful narratives in the gospels- one that speaks in so many ways to the moment in which we find ourselves today. We too live at a time when there is tremendous disappointment and sense of loss on so many different levels of life. On the broader cultural level, people increasingly have given up on the hopes and promises of the modern age- that everything is getting better and better, that we can solve all of our problems with science and technology, that we in the West can run the world-wide show. More and more people don’t trust the institutions- whether social or political or religious. They don’t trust the stories, the myths, the promises that we have

lived by during the past 300 years. Things seem to be fracturing into pieces all over. No one knows who to trust any more or what the future holds. It is a time when we seem to have lost most of our anchors, our stars that have guided us.

And then on the level of Church life, anxiety and fear and discouragement are on the rise. Party divisions and power politics are what one reads about in all kinds of places. One out of every three adult Catholics has left, either for other Christian communities or for nothing. Bishops, theologians, priests, and the people are increasingly afraid to speak honestly about what they think on a variety of issues. Dialogue no longer seems to have the place it had for at least awhile in Church life. For some people the true Catholic Church is making a come-back, while for others the 2nd Vatican Council has been betrayed.

How does one have hope at a time like this? Where do we turn? How many of us would like to leave Jerusalem and find our way to at least the quiet of the Emmaus village! What will it take for our own hearts “to burn within us” once again and for us to recognize the risen Lord in our midst in the breaking of bread? How can we authentically be disciples of Jesus right now, right at this moment, right in the midst of all kinds of stuff that can bring us to despair. In other words, how do we hear that alternative story that Jesus spoke to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, have our eyes opened by the Eucharistic Meal, and live as people of the resurrection, people with a mission?

The answer to this, it seems to me, lies in the question itself. We have to learn to listen once again to the stories of sacred scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ, crucified

and risen from the dead. We need to come to the Eucharistic Meal expecting that God really wants to disclose Himself and to feed us so that we can be His people and do His work. We are being called right now to grasp the initiative and to take seriously the need for us to live a true Christian praxis, which consists in the love of God in Christ being poured out in us and through us.

We need to learn afresh how to live and speak Jesus' own alternative story about Himself not as something manipulative and not as a mechanism of control and self-interest, but as a story of healing and self-giving love. We need to embrace it as something which will indeed kill and deconstruct our old selves- so that we can die and rise again with Christ- and allow us to be put back together, not by agendas of power and control and self-interest, but by the Spirit of the living God. We need to be caught up in the story and learn to reorder our lives according to its symbols and its practices so that we can be energized to go and to tell and to live that alternative story about what God has done for us in Jesus the Christ.

What our world, and our Church, and our own hearts need most just now is a message and a praxis that witness to a God of love and self-giving. And this is what we find in this strange and utterly bizarre story of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen from the dead. We desperately need to hear this story once again, to have "our hearts burn within us", and then to have our lives turned upside down!

Christ is risen!