

Acts 2:22-36

Luke 24:13-35

April 26, 2020

Third Sunday of Easter

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

LOOKING WITH OUR HEARTS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There was an interesting article in *USA Today* about a month ago entitled “As nations grapple with coronavirus, submariners might have no idea a pandemic is going on.”¹ The article was about sailors aboard French nuclear-armed submarines that may have put out to sea for a tour of sixty to seventy days, before the coronavirus pandemic became such a worldwide problem and changed life as we know it. A retired admiral, submarine commander, and former commander of the French ballistic submarine squadron was quoted, “Those who are at sea don’t need this information. They won’t know. The boys need to be completely available for their mission.” According to the article, the submarine commander would probably tell the sailors about the worldwide pandemic a couple of days before they returned to port.

Just imagine if those submariners weren’t told by their commander about the coronavirus pandemic before they reached their home base in the harbor of Brest. A sailor might disembark from the sub, go into town, look around, stop a passerby, and ask, “What’s going on?” The incredulous townspeople would say, “Are you the only person in the whole world who doesn’t know what’s going on? Where have you been? On another planet?” (which, if you think about it, the submariner sort of has been).

Or imagine walking with a friend later this afternoon up Highway 117 North to Rose Hill, about seven miles, the same distance from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. As you and your friend are walking along (with at least six feet of space between you and with your face masks on), you are “talking with each other about all the things that have happened” in the past six weeks as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Suddenly, a stranger catches up with you and asks, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” In your head you might think, “What do you mean, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ What do you think we’re discussing while we’re walking along? Is there anything else to discuss right now?” But your Southern manners don’t allow you to say what you’re thinking, so you simply ask (in an amazed and wondering tone of voice), “Are you the only stranger in Duplin County who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” Imagine, if you will, the stranger looking at you and asking, “What things?”

That’s the situation Cleopas and his companion found themselves in on that first Easter Sunday afternoon. What else was there to talk about except “the things that have taken place there [in Jerusalem] in these days” – the betrayal, denial, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death of their friend Jesus. More than a friend, though, they thought

he was “the One.” No wonder they stood still and looked sad – “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” The fact that some women of their group had gone to the tomb earlier that day, not found the body, and seen a vision of angels who said Jesus was alive doesn’t seem to register or make much difference for Cleopas and his companion. Now their hopes have been crushed, their world has been turned upside down, and they’re on their way back to life as they used to know it, or maybe they’re walking into an unknown future. Perhaps that’s what Luke means when he tells us that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” (Luke 24:16) They were too preoccupied with the horrors of the recent past and the fears of their present to know that it was Jesus who was walking along the way with them. One writer imagines Cleopas telling the stranger, “The women told us this unbelievable, really unbelievable story, about the body gone and angels present and that Jesus is alive, but the men didn’t see him, can’t confirm this, and obviously everyone has lost their minds and really, who can blame them, these events are a crazy-making, devastating source of despair for us all.”²

On this third Sunday of Easter, we might find ourselves in the same situation as Cleopas and his companion. We celebrated the astounding news two weeks ago – “Christ is risen!” – but the circumstances of our lives and our world right now might be keeping our eyes from recognizing the risen Jesus in our midst, walking along the way with us.

In her comments on Luke’s story of the Easter afternoon Emmaus Road walk, Jill Duffield writes in the latest *Presbyterian Outlook*, “. . .on this third Sunday of Easter, the Risen Jesus comes alongside us and hears us as we pour our hearts out. He asks, ‘What things are you discussing?’ And let’s tell him plainly, as raw as we need to, all that’s on our hearts and minds. Then, he offers us a Word. He offers us himself. He gives us his body made known to us in the breaking of the bread. He gives us the bigger context of this tumultuous, scary, hope-testing, expectation-upending time. He tells us again God’s salvation story that has not ended and will not go untold or unaccomplished.”³

If Cleopas and his companion had not looked with their hearts, had not invited this stranger to stay the night in Emmaus, had not taken the broken bread from his hands at the table, they might have thought the story had ended on the cross at Golgotha or in the tomb in Gethsemane.

But Cleopas and his companion **did** look with their hearts, **did** invite the stranger to stay the night, **did** take the broken bread from his hands – and they realized the story was far from over. In fact, the story had an unbelievably wonderful ending – “We have seen the Lord!” – that was really just the beginning of their changed lives.

Again, Jill Duffield writes, “Have not our hearts burned within us these past weeks? Have we not heard and spoken the Logos? Has Jesus not been made known to us in the breaking of the bread, even when we’ve not been in sanctuaries and around communion tables? Jesus has come alongside us wherever we are, in our deep sadness,

reminding us of God's salvation story. The risen Christ reminds us of all we may forget when we are overwhelmed by current events. He makes himself known to us so that we can go and make him known to others."⁴

It's not that Cleopas and his companion didn't know the first part of the story or had their facts wrong. They told the stranger the truth – "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." (Luke 24:19-20) Their story squares with what Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost fifty days later in Jerusalem – "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law." (Acts 2:22-23) If that were the end of the story – if on Sunday morning we stood and said only that "he was crucified, dead, and buried" – we would be, as the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "of all people the most to be pitied."

On Monday, April 10, 1939, Professor Gerhard von Rad preached a sermon on this story about the road to Emmaus, probably to the Confessing Congregation at Jena, Germany. He was Professor of Old Testament at Jena University at the time when Adolph Hitler and the Nazi regime attacked the Old Testament and even the German Church tried to distance itself and deny its association with its Hebrew/Jewish roots.

In those incredibly trying times, at great personal risk, von Rad continued to promote the teaching of the Old Testament and its importance for our Christian faith and understanding of who Jesus is. In his sermon about Cleopas and his companion, von Rad describes them (and the rest of Jesus' disciples) as "quite ordinary, average men" who were called by Jesus. He said, "Whoever hears the call of Jesus – this is the testimony of the gospel and of Christians in all centuries – harshly and inevitably comes up against the cross. The cross is the one thing about Jesus that disquiets and disturbs. This is, indeed, the point beyond which the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not know how to go on. They had surely accepted and granted validity to much about him, may have not done so easily, were discouraged by some his harsh sayings – all of this was possible and not yet the worst – but now came the arrest, the passion and the cross, the grand fiasco of the world, as they saw it. This was the bold line through all their faith and their hopes. And, so, they quite openly and without adornment express their disappointment in this so tremendously meaningful statement: 'But we had hoped that he would redeem Israel!'"⁵

Surely the members of the congregation that Easter Monday, Confessing Christians who resisted Hitler's idolatrous claims, and Professor von Rad himself must have felt at times like Cleopas and his friend. Their hopes may have been dashed. The circumstances of 1939 Germany and the challenges of their lives and to their faith might have seemed like a point beyond which they did not know how to go on. But Professor von Rad knew the story didn't end with Cleopas and his friend standing still, looking sad, with dashed hopes and uncertain futures. For he preached that Easter

Monday, “Dear Congregation, can there be a simpler, more unforgettable witness that our Lord Christ lives, that he moved about in our midst and is still with us, that this Easter story? That he seeks us, pursues us, that he is present in our conversations, that he instructs us and makes us at home at his table.”⁶

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the “Walk to Emmaus” sponsored by the Upper Room Ministries, a three-day “opportunity to meet Jesus Christ in a new way as God’s grace and love is revealed to you through other believers.” Maybe you have been a retreat participant or written letters to people who have made the walk. According to the program’s website, “Participants are encouraged to find ways to live out their individual call to discipleship in their home, church, and community. The objective of Emmaus is to inspire, challenge, and equip the local church members for Christian action in their homes, churches, communities and places of work. Emmaus lifts up a way for our grace-filled lives to be lived and shared with others.”

In the FAQ section of the Walk to Emmaus website, the question is asked, “What is the meaning behind the name ‘Walk to Emmaus?’” Obviously, the name is taken from today’s story at the end of Luke’s gospel. What really captured my attention, however, was this comparison of our contemporary life of faith with those two walking disciples: “Like Christians and churches who are blinded by preoccupation with their own immediate difficulties, these two disciples’ sadness and hopelessness seemed to prevent them from seeing God’s redemptive purpose in things that had happened.”⁷

Dear Congregation, we are living in challenging and troubling times. Our world is turned upside down. Life as we have known it may never return. The future stretches out before us like a great unknown. At times we might feel like we’ve reached a point beyond which we don’t know how to go on.

Dear Congregation, the good news of Easter that we celebrated two weeks ago is still true today, and shows us the way to follow. In his book *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner writes, “Sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only. . . a garden, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our being and imagination. . . what we may see is Jesus himself.”⁸

*Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord.
We want to see you,
high and lifted up, shining in the light of your glory.
Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord.*

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, stay with us, we pray, in every part of our journey, no matter how full of doubt or fear we may be today. Through your Holy Spirit, we pray that you will open our eyes and our hearts. Help us see you as our risen Lord in all your beauty and in all your loving power. Amen.

NOTES

¹John Leicester, “As nations grapple with coronavirus, submariners might have no idea a pandemic is going on,” *USA Today* March 30, 2020 at www.usatoday.com.

²Jill Duffield, “Luke 24:13-45,” 3rd Sunday of Easter April 26, 2020 at www.pres-outlook.org.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Gerhard von Rad, sermon on Luke 24:13-35, preaching on Easter Monday 1939 (April 10), probably to the Confessing Congregation at Jena, Germany (after the pastorates in Jena were occupied by German Christians), in the city church.

⁶Ibid.

⁷www.emmaus.upperroom.org/faq

⁸Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 87-88.