

“And They Recognized Him”
A Sermon Delivered
at
Plymouth Congregational Church
on
April 20, 2008
by
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Luke 24: 13 – 35 (Emmaus Road)

This familiar story begins with the words, “Now on that same day” That day was Easter. This story takes place on Easter afternoon.

Remember for a moment the way in which Luke told the story of Easter morning. It began at dawn with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of James and some other unnamed women at the tomb. There at the tomb they did not find the body but instead were confronted by a couple presumptive angels (political language creeps into everything these days).

Luke then reports that the women went to the apostles and told them what they had seen at the tomb.

And what was the response of the Apostles?

“But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” Vs. 11

Peter went to check it out for himself but at least in Luke’s account, there is no evidence that any others moved an inch.

We don’t know how many people in Jerusalem were aware of Jesus’ trial and death but we do know that the group extended beyond the original Apostles. Cleopas and his companion were a part of this larger group.

The story is worth a look.

It was Easter afternoon. It was time to go home. The tourists were leaving Jerusalem and heading home. The city that had swelled to ten times its normal size for the celebration of Passover was now returning to normal. Pilate who had pompously entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday had probably already returned to his Mediterranean villa at Caesarea Maritima.

It was time to resume the journey of life for both the powerful and the powerless. Approximately 50% of the population was unemployed. The crowds were predominantly unemployed young people. With an average life expectancy for poor people of about thirty years of age it's not hard to figure out why the streets would be filled with children and youth.

We know almost nothing about Cleopas and his companion. They were probably country trades people. The location of Emmaus is even in some question. Some believe it to be a little village the traditional 7 miles from Jerusalem. A larger body of scholars believes it to be some 15 miles away through the mountains. The latter location would put it at the far end of a one-day walk and return trip.

It doesn't change the point. The point is that on Easter Cleopas and his companion, probably his wife, set out from Jerusalem on the journey of their lives and at least at the beginning they had no idea!

As they left Jerusalem a stranger joined them. The stranger enquired as to the topic of their conversation and was told the story of holy week, Good Friday and Easter in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In addition, they were told of the palpable sense of loss they and all Jesus' disciples had experienced in the crushing crucifixion and even the embarrassment of idle tale of those who reported the body to be missing.

"We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," Cleopas said.

Finally the stranger could stand it no longer. Without telling them who he was, Jesus began to tell them what had happened. A story not grounded in fear and despair but rather in the promises and prophecies of faith. The journey continued with Cleopas and his companion listening intently if not bewilderedly to the witness of their traveling stranger.

When at last they did reach Emmaus, it was almost evening and Cleopas and his companion prevailed upon the stranger to stay the night with them.

As they sat down to supper in Emmaus, all creation stood on the pivot point of history.

Jesus took the bread, blessed it and broke it and their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

Retroactively Cleopas and companion recognized that Jesus really had been teaching them as they traveled on their journey together. They hadn't understood at the time but now with the recognition gained from the breaking of the bread came a recollection that was rich and faith building.

How many times has this happened to every one of us? We don't understand at the time but later, with the addition of new insight, we can look back and understand and recognize powerful lessons that went almost unnoticed the first time.

And what did Cleopas and his companion do when finally they realized the savior was in their midst?

They got up, took off and headed back for Jerusalem. No matter that the hour was late and the journey back to Jerusalem was dangerous and long. No matter, there was incredibly good news to be shared and desperate people back in Jerusalem who needed to hear it.

This Emmaus Road Story forms the foundation for the way we celebrate communion here at Plymouth. It is not to say that the last supper is not eternally the inspiration but this story is so "right on" for the way we live our lives.

Jesus comes to us in the midst of the journeys of our lives. Most of the time we don't recognize him at all. We may even engage in conversation/debate and study and yet still not comprehend the importance of what is happening.

And then—every once in a great while—the scales fall away from our eyes and we realize that we are not on this journey alone.

In a moment of exquisite joy I had it illustrated for me just yesterday: a bride turned to her dad for that kiss that symbolically sent her on her way. The father—tears streaming down his face—whispered to his daughter, "God be with you" and suddenly he knew, in that instant, that God had been with her, was with her and would be with her.

We are not on our journey alone it's just that we don't always know it.

Sitting in a hospital waiting room I heard a wife wonder out loud as to why it seemed so natural to pray on that day when it would never have occurred to her a week earlier. Had God suddenly arrived on the scene? Of course not. What has suddenly happened is that our eyes are opened.

As usually clueless people, we're in good company. The risen Christ came and walked with Cleopas and his companion for the better part of a day and yet they did not recognize him.

And then Jesus took the bread and blessed it and broke it.

This is not a magic act.

This opening of our eyes.

This doesn't impose a new set of realities. It opens our eyes to the realities that God has placed all around us all along.

This table is set so that we might know that we are not on our journey alone. This table is set so that again and again and again we may be allowed to open our eyes and see anew the wonder of the Jesus who is standing at our side.

This table is set so that we may suddenly remember the gestures of insight, compassion and generosity that struggled to get our attention when we were too distracted to see.

In the breaking of the bread we see again what has been right there all along.

Cleopas and his companion believed that they had witnessed the death of salvation during the trial and crucifixion of Jesus in Jerusalem. In the breaking of the bread they recognized that instead they had been present at the very hinge point of history.

What shall we recognize this day when we break the bread?

Amen