

The scriptures of the Easter season are always very special as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and remember that he remained with them awhile, continuing to teach them of the new reality available to them and their role in that new reality. The newness of the experience of the risen Christ still present and walking among those who had known and loved him was experienced first with confusion and then joy. During the Easter season we visit each of these encounters with the risen Lord that were recorded. It seems each season we find that like those first disciples there is a new possibility and opportunity within these accounts for us to the encounter afresh the risen Lord. This experience is there waiting for us if we are willing to open our eyes. According to Luke's narrative, our context is that we have just left Peter and the one whom Jesus loved going back home from the empty tomb. The gospel reading this morning finds us outside of Jerusalem, traveling with two of them who were going to a village called Emmaus. Now in the way of these texts, in this introduction we are not told who these two travelers are. The implication is that they are two of a group which has been left behind, but the group is not defined—at least not at the beginning; there is no connection to the tomb or to what has happened in Jerusalem until we begin to eavesdrop on their conversation. It seems that their conversation is all about these things that have happened to them in Jerusalem. The narrative continues with verses 15-16: "While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." It has always seemed an important part of this narrative that at the beginning Luke points out that their eyes were kept from recognizing him. In the other resurrections appearances of Jesus that is generally not the case. Mary, at the tomb does not recognize Jesus until he calls her name. But usually, Jesus is recognized on sight by his disciples. These travelers on the road to Emmaus are not of the twelve, but as we will see later, they are known to the twelve. So we might wonder what prevents them from recognizing Jesus; we might wonder if this reason is within them or if Jesus has a purpose for the encounter beginning in this manner. As the two travelers are walking, a stranger has joined their walk, who now joins their conversation by asking them a question which so startles them they actually stop walking. Verses 17—"And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you are walking along?' They stood still, looking sad." In this day when people walk around talking on phones through ear buds that you can't see, probably before the days of the six foot distancing, it would be highly unusually for someone to come up and begin a conversation with a stranger in this manner. We rarely begin conversations with stranger any more. So this scene may require a bit more imagination to transport it into our context than it would have when I was young. But try to imagine a scene pre-pandemic when there has been a major disaster. You have gone shopping and are waiting in the check-out line and spot a neighbor with whom you begin discussing what you know of

the disaster...perhaps a hurricane is approaching the coast...you are worried about friends...you know they have relatives perhaps in the path of the storm...so you begin speaking of it. In the middle of this conversation someone you don't know interrupts and asks: "What storm?" You wonder where they have been that they haven't heard of the disaster looming over the coast. That is the picture that this narrative has always brought to mind for me up to this point. I imagine these two travelers lost in intense conversation being interrupted by this interloper who comes alongside them, asking casually, "So what's going on with you two?" The matter-of-fact greeting seems totally tone deaf in the wake of the week's events in the life of the followers of Jesus. In light of today's events it might be like someone coming up to you in the grocery store aisle, standing way too close for COVID-19 comfort and asking, "Why are you wearing a mask?" Your response, probably with exclamations points as you back up would be, "What do you mean, why am I wearing a mask? Are you the only person on planet earth who has not heard of this global pandemic and all the pain and suffering it has wrought?" The strength of our response would perhaps also be influenced by other factors. We'd likely not think too kindly of such a thoughtless question, especially if we personally have been laid off or lost a loved one or are doing some work deemed essential which puts them at risk of being infected. Jesus has asked them, "What things?" And they replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priest and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him." These are the facts as they have witnessed them. They continue to express all the things that they had hoped about Jesus. "But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Despite being astounded that this stranger could have been in Jerusalem and remained unaware of what had occurred, these two travelers who have left Jerusalem relate to him all that they have witnessed and all that they had hoped. But their hopes are in the past tense. Despite the reports of the women, they have chosen not to remain in Jerusalem. They give their testimony, bearing witness to the One they cannot yet recognize. They are honest and authentic and offer no judgment of the person in front of them as they make their way away from Jerusalem to Emmaus explaining what is consuming their hearts and minds as they travel. Then this newcomer shares with them what he thinks and feels also. He invites them to put their knowledge into a larger context, into the larger story that they knew well, but that their current crisis has caused them to forget. Cleopas in his testimony voices a hopelessness that many may now feel. A hopelessness that I suspect each of us will feel at one point or another during our life's journey. He says, "We had hoped." He then adds, "Besides all this. It is now the third day." Somehow that it is the third day means

that hope is at an end. The odds of anything positive happening are not zero, zilch, nada...no reason to look up. Cleopas cannot even credit what he has also been told that the women of the group have reported. He is essentially saying, we have no hope and the women have come back with this tall tale, they have told us this unbelievable, really unbelievable story about the body being gone and angels being present; that Jesus is alive. But the men went and checked but didn't see him, they can't confirm this, and obviously everyone has lost their minds, and really who can blame them, these events are such a crazy-making, devastating turn of events and source of despair for all of us. For many of us, our spring has also been a source of despair making events. The economy is wrecked. Those who were on the margins have sunk even lower, many who were not on the margins now are. We've been told to stay home not for weeks but for months and many cannot see the reasons for this. There may/may not be a resurgence of the disease in the fall. We do not know who to trust, what advice to follow, so much of what we had planned or hoped for this spring and the future did not happen and now may never. It is now over a month and people are still dying, and the future is unknown and projections vary and are uncertain about when or if "normal" will ever return or be the same. So on our imaginary road out of Jerusalem when we are discussing the events around us and a stranger asks us what it is that is on our hearts and minds, the events of this pandemic are likely what will be the topic. We need to be like Cleopas in our honesty about our feelings and admit to our fears. Jesus' response to Cleopas is "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" Jesus then began with Moses and walked through all the scriptures and interpreted to them the revelations within them about himself and his mission. At this point, they reached the village of Emmaus and Jesus accepted their invitation to stay with them. He joined them at Table and in the taking of the bread as he broke and blessed it before giving it to them, their eyes were opened and they knew him. Once they recognized him, he vanished from their sight. Perhaps the reason they had not recognized him initially was their loss of hope. They had forgotten the teaching that he had given them while he was with them so that they needed to be reminded before they could believe. Perhaps that is why this story of the Emmaus road seems to apt this Easter season. Because the risen Jesus comes alongside us in our times of crisis. When we offer all that's on our hearts and minds, then he offers us a Word—he offers us God's Word—He offers 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, frightening, hope-testing, expectation-upending time in our journey. He tells us again God's salvation story has not ended and will not go untold or unaccomplished no matter how differently the setting. He calls us to remember. Remember all he taught us. Remember, he promised to meet us in Galilee. Remember, he will be with us. When we urge Jesus to stay, he will come and abide with us. He will eat with us. He will bring light into our darkness; hope into or despair. Our hopes are not unfounded. Our faith is not misplaced. The testimony of the women at the tomb is true. Jesus will come alongside of us wherever we are, in our deep

sadness, reminding us of God's salvation story when we are overwhelmed by current events. Jesus makes himself known to us so that we can go and make him known to others through faithful hope, loving care refusal to buy into the world's despair for on the road to Emmaus we are never alone. Thanks be to God.