

## Opening Our Eyes

Most of the scriptures that we encounter during this Easter Season, the post resurrection period when Jesus went about revealing himself to his disciples are familiar to us...especially since we visit most of them annually. This year we will spend most of this time within John's gospel and that like today, the one narrated by Luke—either directly from Luke's gospel or from the sequel known as the Acts of the Apostles'. That title is a misnomer in many respects as the driving force within everything described is the Holy Spirit which in Acts arrives at the Jewish festival of Pentecost...fifty days after the Passover festival. While each of these narratives is focused on the same revelation, the how that revelation is accomplished varies among them. For John's gospel the constant emphasis on darkness and light, blindness and sight is so obvious it is hard to miss. Mark's gospel focus is centered around an intense sense of urgency...everything is prefaced with at "once" or "immediately" while Matthew's attention is directed toward how God's plan foretold by the prophets is being enacted. The post resurrection experience found in Luke's passage designated for today is a great one for illustrating a theme important in Luke's gospel...it occurs on the road...the road to a small town just about seven miles away from Jerusalem. Much of Jesus' life was spent traveling from place to place with his disciples...going from place to place and crossing borders which separated those areas defined by those of Jewish training and behavior with those inhabited by gentiles. So this post-resurrection experience found only in Luke's gospel happening on the road has several layers of meaning for those in Luke's audience. Like the scriptures we have already considered this one happens on the same day as the tomb was found opened. This passage describes two people on a journey toward the small village of Emmaus...located about seven miles outside of Jerusalem, their point of departure for the journey. They are talking with each other and discussing events that have just taken place in Jerusalem, evidently very preoccupied with their discussion as they at first fail to notice someone has come alongside them as they have walked. When asked to explain what they were talking about the text tells us that they thought this new companion was a stranger...a stranger whom they assumed really should have known what the subject of their discussion was since he was also departing Jerusalem. They responded with "are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" According to the text "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" which is a statement given in the passive voice...what prevented the recognition is not defined. When Mary first sees the risen Jesus, she does not recognize him...until he calls her name. In John's gospel, when Jesus first appears in that locked room, the disciples do not react with joy when they see someone in their midst. Although his appearance is not remarked upon, recognition seems to require something more than his presence. Jesus persists in trying to get them to explain what they have been discussing, so they sadly give a brief synopsis of the events from Jesus' arrest until his crucifixion; explaining they had had "great hopes" because of this prophet who had been mighty in deed before God and all the people. Now these hopes have left them, even to their discounting reports that women among the disciples reported that Jesus had risen. These two, Cleopas and his unnamed companion are familiar with all that has happened and have remained in Jerusalem until the third day. Holding on to that hope until to remain in Jerusalem seemed foolish and a new direction was needed. Jesus, without identifying himself takes them to task for being foolish and slow to believe as he explains all of the scriptures about God's plan from Moses until the present. Since

no information about Jesus' appearance indicates anything add about his looks, they why the disciples failure to know him in each appearance seems to be closely tied with their "unbelief" as John's gospel describes it. They were not without faith and were not uninformed but through their talking "on the way" were trying to understand all that had happened. The most common way of looking at that passive voice about their inability to recognize Jesus is that God interfered and that it was needed that Jesus unwrap the meaning of their scriptural history so they could understand. But there is another way to look at their recognition issues...in each case what they saw did not make sense in how they understood the world. In the instance of that first morning's discovery, death was a final end to life. They did not expect to see a risen Jesus. This is echoed by Cleopas and the other disciples to quickly discount those initial reports of the women seeing the risen Christ. From the beginning, when Peter announced Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the perceptions Peter had interfered with what Jesus understood as the meaning...that it would involve suffering and death. Peter's hopes and those of those who journeyed with Jesus were looking for release from Roman oppression. Those who had followed Jesus and watched his deeds of power "had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." That was the meaning of the hosanna they cried out as Jesus entered Jerusalem that day just before Passover. To them, that redemption meant the overthrow of Rome and the restoration of the Davidic nation state of Israel. God's plan and vision to transform the world through Christ was not something they expected, looked for or had wanted with any understanding the possibility for redemption which would bridge the gap between humanity and God's reign. Their preconceived notions of what the messiah would accomplish prevented them from recognizing how God was at work among them. During this passage Jesus comes alongside them to explain what God is doing, he meets them in their grief and goes with them on that journey which spans a great distance...much greater than the seven mile walk as that road to Emmaus takes them from grief and unbelief to joy and belief. They go from being broken and questioning to being filled with joy and experiencing amazing grace. At the beginning there is a type of resignation in what is being experienced...we had hoped. When they arrive in Emmaus when it looked as if this stranger who had walked with them was going to continue, they urged him to remain with them. So Jesus joined them for the meal which would close the day, and in that coming together in fellowship...in the blessing and breaking of the bread for the meal...they now recognized just who had joined them on the way. Instead of remaining in Emmaus they "within the hour" left and returned to Jerusalem to find the eleven disciples gathered in that locked room to share their news only to find that Peter has now also seen the Lord. This passage is about us in many ways. It's all about what happened on the road, or on the way as it is described in verse 35. It is about the place where many of us spend a lot of time both literally and figuratively. The news of the resurrection does not mean there are no disappointments. Resurrection belief often has times when we also enter into the experience like those earliest disciples...but we had hoped. This text is about people who are saddened because their fondest hopes have not come to pass, they are on the way back home because the prophecies of Jesus and the hope of redemption had grown cold and they were not able to sustain hope any longer. They began to suspect that the whole thing had been a mistake, a worthy hope and one unlikely to ever be realized. For them Good Friday had not been Good. Time had passed and there was no change, no new life, no Jesus to lead them. Are we not like that? Like them we know the stories. We've heard the biblical word. Often like them when

Jesus propounds all of the Scriptures to the two travelers in the story, we do not see him present with us, present in our world. We talk endlessly, filling many library shelves with our words. And all of our talk does not always lift our sadness about what we see in our world. Our talk does not change our expectations about what God could do or would want to do. There is a type of resignation in this...that the world's ways have not changed with the resurrection of Jesus. Where is the hoped for healing of our world's brokenness? Where is God's justice for those scripture tells us are God's beloved children? The disciples in Emmaus recognized Jesus when they saw his characteristic behavior of giving, of feeding, of caring for his sheep— whatever way you want to describe the blessing and distributing of bread—it was then they knew him. The joy at the end of the passage is real, as is the way the two raced to return to Jerusalem to report the resurrection. Death and resurrection do indeed fit into a long-established pattern of the way God works in a world as unrelentingly real as this one is. But truthful understanding of the resurrection joy requires the honest recognition of the reality of deep disappointment. The truth is still expressed in that “we had hoped”...phrase. Maybe we still do...some of us (sometimes) don't or can't or won't hope, at least not yet. But we had hoped speaks of a future that is not to be, a dream that created energy and enthusiasm but did not materialize, there is much disappointment, heartbreak and failure in this life, and all too often we tend to gloss over that in church. We want to move quickly to the joy. But we have to recognize that part of being human is being broken and brokenhearted. And in this passage, it is to the brokenhearted disciples that Jesus comes. It the risen Christ who comes and walks alongside us on the road, astonished that we don't see as we ought...teaching us through scriptures that we may understand, then sharing his presence through bread and juice and granting burning hearts that prompt us back into the world to witness and serve. This life is one long road trip...and by long I am not referring to how many miles or how much time. No it is a long trip between Jerusalem and Emmaus because the distance that is measured is between “we had hoped” and “the Lord is risen indeed”. It seems like forever, the longest trip ever. And if we are honest, most of us are between distress and belief, between disillusionment and acceptance most of the time. Between dashed hopes for God's reign to be fully here and the reality of our brokenness. The amount of space devoted to narrative in the Bible matters. So when a conversation takes as long as today's it is important to look at what happens between the start and the finish. And what happens here, of course, is that Jesus shows up. The resurrection is God's answer to death; the promise of life beyond this one. But the resurrection also makes it possible to see new life in our lives now. That does not make it an easy answer to the death we experience every day...the death of a relationship, of innocence, of choice, of freedom, of justice, of civility, of respect, of truth. These are all real, very real deaths in our lives. The resurrection does not take away these deaths. But it does give us hope. Hope like fire needs tending. It is not a static object to be acquired and admired, but a living characteristic that we can let die or let loose. The road to Emmaus tells us that when we suffer distress and anguish, the Lord will indeed save our lives by walking the road with us, by asking us “what things” to open our eyes, which means that then the road we are on might actually get us somewhere. And that somewhere will eventually be the place where we recognize and start to live out the life-changing presence of the resurrected Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.