

Sermon for April 30, 2017 – “A Travelers Tale”

Third Sunday after Easter, Year A – Text: Luke 24:13-49

Westwood First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Jeff Colarossi

Cleopas and I had walked the road from Emmaus to Jerusalem and back again many times. It was only 7 miles but today, it seemed so much longer. The road stretched out endlessly before us. The long day after the Sabbath had finally dragged to a close. The shadows were creeping forward in languid lengths. We should've quickened our pace and hurried along our way in order to reach home before the sun had set. But what did it matter if darkness caught us on the way? What did anything matter anymore? For us and for a handful like us, the sun had set long since. An eerie, crushing darkness had enveloped us three days before. And now, although the sun was still bright upon the road, we were like men groping, stumbling in the dark. We were feeling our way along a much-traveled path, one that was now strange and unfamiliar. But why hurry home? What would be there? A dark house, a dead candle on the table, and tasteless bread. But, we couldn't walk in silence, we talked. We talked about the past. We talked about yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that. I say we talked, but mostly we asked each other questions. Not that I expected Cleopas to have the answers, nor did he expect any of me. It was simply a way of expressing the hurt, despair, and frustration each of us felt. Most of our questions could be summed up in the one word, “Why?” Why had the Master, who'd spoken so confidently of God, of love, and of overcoming the world, why would He let Himself be overcome by the hatred of the high priests and the stupidity of the Romans and the rabble? Why had He, who'd performed miracles, who'd raised the dead, why would He let Himself be nailed to a cross and crucified like a common criminal? Why hadn't He answered the challenge of the high priest and come down from the cross? Then they, and we, would've known that He was who He said He was, who we wanted Him, needed Him, to be.

So, we plodded along asking each other unanswerable questions, trying to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and Jerusalem, and maybe begin to forget what'd happened there. Jerusalem – the holy city. I didn't care if I ever saw it again, temple, or no temple. But as we walked I began to feel that we weren't alone. I'd heard no distant footsteps, just an awareness of being followed. Then the feeling became a reality. There was someone else traveling with us on the road. At first He said nothing. He simply suited His pace to ours and we walked together. But, oddly enough, I felt no fear. It seemed right that He should walk beside us. He listened a while, and then He asked, “What are you talking about?” We stood still and looked at Him in amazement. Surely anyone who'd been in Jerusalem for Passover would know what we were talking about. What **else** was there to talk about? So, Cleopas, almost impatiently, said: “You must be the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know what's been going on there.” Then the stranger said, “What things?”

For a fleeting moment, I caught a flash in His eye that told me He wasn't so much looking for information as He was trying to find out what we thought was important. Well, we began to tell Him. It never occurred to us He might've been a temple spy. It seemed right and natural to tell Him our deepest thoughts and reveal our shattered, broken hopes. He listened with great intensity that told us that He really heard everything that we'd said. We told this stranger of Jesus of Nazareth. We told Him everything about Him. How we'd been convinced by His words and deeds, that He was the promised Messiah. How the hope of all God's people had been centered in Him. We told Him with both grief and anger how He'd been betrayed, tried, condemned, and crucified. We told Him how He'd died on a cross between two thieves, an agonizing, horrible, lonely death, exposed and naked to the taunts and jeers of His enemies.

We told Him of the ridiculous rumors some excitable women of our company had spread, that they'd found His tomb empty. That angels, angels, mind you, had appeared to them saying that He was alive. The part about the empty tomb was true; it was confirmed by some of the men. Still, there are many ways to empty a grave. But alive? If this were true, and how could it be?, then where is He? If He'd been raised, if it were true, then surely He would've strode into the very Court of the Temple and scared the High Priest and Sanhedrin out of their wits and proved them wrong. He would've gone to Pilate's palace, stood face-to-face with the trembling governor, and said, "You asked me, 'what is truth?' Then look at me. "The truth is that the might of Rome cannot defeat the Messiah of the God of Israel." But none of these things had happened. The tomb was empty, that was true enough. But so what? It was no more empty than our hearts. No more empty than all the dreary days ahead of us.

For a moment, the Stranger was silent. Then He began to speak. I expected Him to speak smooth words of comfort, to share our sorrow and to ease our pain. But instead His words were strong. His voice vibrant with an underlying tone of impatience. **"Oh foolish people, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken."** Then He began to teach us from our own scriptures, beginning with Genesis and going through the prophets. He reminded us that all through our history God had never abandoned His people. How time and again God had overruled the cruel purposes of tyrants to redeem His people. In the time of Moses, the Lord with his mighty hand mocked the power of the Egyptian pharaoh, freeing His people from slavery gifting them with a law and a land. From the prophets, He showed us how God's Chosen One was the Suffering Servant, giving Himself fully for His people, but never forsaken by a God who can raise new life from death.

I considered myself something of a student of the scriptures but I'd never seen them in this light before. Never had they made so much sense! Never had I grasped in both hands at once the mysterious holiness and the yearning, suffering love of God! Never had so much become so clear so quickly. Even the tragedy of the bloody cross began to take its place in the perspective of God's plan and purpose. I began to hope that the rumors of a Risen Christ might indeed be true.

As He talked we were unaware of how quickly we'd covered the last few miles home. Suddenly we stood at our front door and the sun had almost set. The stranger turned to leave but we couldn't let Him go alone out into the night so, we urged Him to stay. Without hesitation, He came in with us. Quickly we prepared a simple meal and the three of us sat down at the table together. For some reason, neither Cleopas or I felt we should act as host. Quite naturally, with no pretension, the stranger was the host. He took the bread and said the prayer of blessing. He broke the bread with strong authority and gave it to us.

And then it happened! In that moment, we knew Him! Don't ask me **how** we knew – we just did! Something about His voice, perhaps. Something in the way He prayed. The mystery He made of a simple act like breaking bread. It couldn't have been anyone else. No one but our Master with whom we'd shared bread before. Indeed, He was alive! And in that moment so were we! But as suddenly as we knew that He was with us – He was gone... **That is – we couldn't see Him.** But there was no sense of loss. No crushing loneliness. There was an exhilarating joy. A sense of new life. An overwhelming urgency to share, to tell someone that it's true. That He is the Christ, and He is alive! Without finishing our meal, we were out the door and on the road once more. Back to Jerusalem, from which only hours before we'd tried to escape. We found the others in the upper room. They sat in wonder for they too, had heard the news from Peter. We weren't disappointed we weren't the first to bear this good news. We were too intent to tell them of how He'd come to us. How He'd followed us when we were trying to escape. How He'd listened, and spoken, and then made Himself known in the breaking of bread.

The dead-end road to Emmaus had become the way to resurrection life. Never again will we walk that road, or **any** other road, alone. We would always walk with the assurance that He walks with us. Never again will we read scripture without hearing His voice speak to us through them. Never again will we come home at the end of a weary day to an empty house, a dead candle on the table, and tasteless bread. We know that He'll be there to bless and break the bread and make Himself known.

Well, friends, that's my story. I know you have your own Emmaus Roads too, which seem beset with doubts and fears and broken hopes. But let me tell you this good news: Jesus Christ is alive...He is as alive today as He was when He walked the road with us. And He wants to walk your road, too, alongside you. With Him beside you, your Emmaus Road can become the way of resurrection life. Because Christ is risen indeed!

Thanks be to God!

Amen and amen.