

**"Faith and Hindsight"**  
**Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**Text: Luke 24:13-35**  
**April 6, 2008**  
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The story of the Emmaus encounter is one of my favorites. I love all the elements of this narrative so much—the drama, the mystery, even the humor—that quite frankly, I find it a hard passage to preach. There are just too many things about it I would like to say, because there are too many things about it that I think are important for us to notice.

For instance I think we need to notice that these two followers of Jesus, who seem to know a lot about him and what had happened to him in the preceding week, don't realize that it is him who has joined them on their journey. Something is keeping their eyes from being able to recognize him in the flesh. What is it that is affecting their perception so dramatically?

There are many things that could have preoccupied or distracted or concerned them in some way, but the text tells us it was something in particular. According to Luke, the two on the road to Emmaus confess that their hopes had been dashed. Jesus had not done what they had counted on him to do, what they had dreamed he would do, what they had expected him to do. He disappointed them, you see, and it's important for us to notice that *nothing blinds the eyes quite like disappointment, when things don't turn out like we had planned.*

I also think we need to notice in this story that when the three-

some gets to Emmaus, Jesus does not assume that the other two want to spend more time with him. In fact he walks ahead of them as if he is going his own way. But once they emphatically invite him to stay, urging him strongly to remain with them, he does so gladly. Jesus won't hang around where he is not wanted. It's important for us to notice that *we have to invite him to be present with us.*

You probably have noticed that in this story an understanding of the person and work of Christ grows and develops over time. Faith is pictured here by Luke as a journey, a pilgrimage, a process. For the two followers on the road to Emmaus, what begins as a discussion *about* Christ ends with a knowledge *of* Christ. He becomes real for them only after he has been present with them for a period of time. That's how we understand the Christian life. It is a road we follow, a path we take that leads us to a personal relationship with the Lord. It's not instantaneous. *It takes time, in fact a lifetime, for us fully to experience God in Christ.*

In addition, I think it is important that we notice in this story the role of both the exposition of scripture and the observing of the sacraments in our journey of faith. Luke seems to be telling us that it is in the practice of biblical interpretation and the experience of the Lord's Supper that we encounter the presence of the risen Christ. That's what it means to journey with him. *When we allow the word of God to be explained to us and we feed on that word as we take communion together, then he is made known to us.*

We need to notice as well that there is an element of tragedy in this story, the tragedy of a missed opportunity. I've often wondered if

that is why the two on the road to Emmaus wind up experiencing such heartburn. After all, they had Jesus in their midst, trying to help them grow in their faith, but they were too caught up in their own agendas to be open to what he might have to offer them until he was gone and it was too late. That's enough to have made them sick to their stomachs when they realized it. They blew it, and they knew it. It was a moment lost forever, except to serve as a warning to us not to repeat the same mistake. When God sends something good our way, something that could benefit us greatly if we only would allow it to, *let's be careful not to miss such an opportunity because we have allowed our own stuff to close our hearts and minds.* That's just a formula for indigestion.

I mentioned early on in this sermon that this Emmaus story has elements of drama, mystery, and even humor. Did you catch the little dash of humor Luke has thrown into the narrative? Jesus joins the two on the road as they are engaged in a serious discussion. It is obvious that Jesus wants to join in on their conversation. So how does he do it? *He plays dumb.* He acts like he is completely clueless. In fact he pretends to be so ignorant about the events that have just taken place in Jerusalem that the two travelers say to him, in essence, "Say, Buddy, just which planet have you commuted here from?" I find it extremely humorous that Jesus would fake being uninformed of the events of Holy Week, his own passion story.

But we know why he does it. He wants to hear what these followers of his have to say. He wants to catch a glimpse of the experience of his death and resurrection from their perspective. He wants to see, or fail to see, as they do. He wants to be one of them, if only for a little while.

I don't know about you, but I can pray to this kind of Lord, one who is willing to play dumb about what is going on in my world *just so he can listen to me share with him my thoughts and my feelings.*

These are some of the things I love about this wonderful story, so rich and full of important elements. But the aspect of this story I want to draw your attention to this morning is yet another important insight this narrative offers to us. The two travelers on the road to Emmaus recognize the presence of Christ only after the fact. The glimpse they catch of him is the one they see in their rearview mirrors. Their experience of Christ is that of hindsight.

We know about hindsight. What is it we say about hindsight? It is always 2020. We can see so clearly what has happened already. When we look back, everything becomes as plain as day. That's the beauty of hindsight. And I believe that hindsight is extremely important to faith. Perhaps that is what Luke is trying to tell us in this narrative. There is a relationship between faith and hindsight. It's no accident that we can see better where God has been working in our lives in the past than we can see where God might be working in our lives in the present. Like the followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, we may be too preoccupied, too distracted, too caught up in our own concerns to see Christ walking side by side with us. But *when we pause long enough to recall, to reflect on, and to remember what has taken place in our lives, his presence is made known to us.*

Let me share with you a moment like that I had some time back. My mother was diagnosed with lung cancer in early 1998. Despite chemotherapy and radiation, she lasted eighteen months. Especially

toward the end of that period of time, my father, my sister, and I prayed that we would have her with us for a little longer, yet we prepared ourselves for what seemed to be inevitable. We were grateful for the time we had—a time to reminisce, a time to express appreciation, a time to say goodbye, and especially for my father, a time to become self-sufficient enough to live without her. We were drawn closer to one another than we ever had been, and we joyfully celebrated the closeness of our family's relationship.

We were indeed thankful, because we knew all too well that just three short years before that, we were not a family. We were estranged. As happens in families from time to time, we had a major falling out, so much so that we had very little to do with one another. For the eight years between 1988 and 1996, I did not visit with my mother and father nor did they with me. And my sister's relationship with them during that period of time, though not as drastically severed as mine, was fragile and unstable at best. We lived separate lives, not involved with each other in the least.

Then a miraculous thing happened. All of us independently and for different reasons reached the same conclusion: *Life is just too short not to be a family.* Whatever had happened to tear us apart was no longer enough to keep us apart. It was time to forget the past and begin a new future. And so at the beginning of 1997, we reconciled as a family—father, mother, brother, sister. And the amazing thing was that we simply picked back up where we had left off. It was as if we had not missed those eight years. There were no old wounds, no unfinished business, no axes to grind, no hidden agendas, no grudges, debts, or

obligations. There was just our being together again as a family.

A little over a year later we received the news of mom's condition. It was devastating for all of us, and in the weeks and months that followed, we went through a lot together with her illness. We watched the disease slowly but relentlessly take her life away. It was agonizingly painful to watch at times. It brought out anger and frustration in us; it caused us to cry; it pushed us to the edge of our ability to accept the situation and cope with it. And it forced us to ask the question, "Where is the Lord in all this? Why isn't God here with us? Why isn't he walking down this road beside us? Where is God when we need him?"

It was hard to see God at that point in time. Our eyes were kept from recognizing the Lord in our midst by all that preoccupied and distracted and concerned us in our taking care of my mother—her medications, her doctor's appointments, the visits from her hospice nurses, preparing meals for her, wheeling her from one part of the house to another to conserve her breathing, and, eventually, making decisions with her about her funeral service. There were so many things to attend to that we couldn't recognize whether or not the Lord was walking with us. And when we were honest enough to admit it, we could be more than a little disappointed in God. That was not hard at all. The truth is that things with my mother did not turn out anything like we had thought or hoped or prayed they would.

But thank God for hindsight. Quite frankly, without it, I would have had more than a little trouble with my own faith when my mother passed away. It's hindsight that kept my faith alive at that time, because I knew that God was with my family. *God was walking with us,*

because *God had walked with us* in the past and leading up to the present. That's why we were a family when we most needed to be one. That's why we were able to support and encourage and uphold one another. God brought us together at just the right time, when we desperately needed each other. Hindsight showed me what God was up to when my family's reconciliation took place those three years earlier. Hindsight showed me just how much God had been at work to prepare me and my family to be able to deal with mother's declining health and death. *God was walking with us to be sure, but it was hindsight that made that clear.*

So I stand before you today as one who has experienced the same holy heartburn as did the two on the road to Emmaus. Through the crisis my family faced with my mother's illness, the Lord was made known to us. I believe it is true in any crisis we face individually or as a church. And the Lord was made known to us in the same way he was to those two travelers. Whenever we break the bread together, that is, *whenever we recall, reflect on, and remember*, the Lord becomes present with us, and we recognize how much our hearts burn within us as a result. Our faith is renewed and strengthened by our hindsight, allowing us to see that as the Lord has walked with us in the past, he walks with us now. May our hindsight remind us how much the Lord has been with us, so that we may have the assurance that the Lord indeed is with us still.