

Easter 3A 2017 Sermon

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of Jesus' disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" 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 priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that 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." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



Our Gospel story today is one of my favorite stories in the Bible – perhaps in part because I can remember so clearly, as a child, seeing a poster tacked to the wall of my Sunday School classroom depicting this Gospel scene.

As I have grown older, my appreciation for this story has only grown deeper, for I realize that there is so much **there** in this story, this tale of the two disillusioned disciples walking away from Jerusalem, who have a stranger come walk with them, and then invite the stranger to stay for a meal, then recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread just before he disappears, and then excitedly return to Jerusalem. There is so much there! Many commentators and preachers point out that the whole story is the pattern for what we do here in Eucharist each Sunday: In the midst of our daily lives, sometimes weary and disillusioned just like those disciples in our Gospel, we gather in this place where Jesus comes to us, and we “have the Scriptures opened to us,” like Jesus did for them, so that we might make sense of our lives in the light of God’s mercy. We share a meal at which we might recognize and be nourished by Christ’s own presence. And then we are sent back out into the world to partner in God’s work and to share God’s grace. Yes, this story IS a story of Eucharist.

But it is also a demonstration – almost a parable, if you will – of our need for a receptive kind of prayer.

Let me explain. The resurrected Christ, in this story, makes himself present to two disciples in the midst of their journey, and walks along with them – just as He is present to *us* in the midst of **our** life journeys, and walks along with us. The *problem* is that, in the words of St. Luke, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” And **I** find that, more often than not, *my* eyes are just like that.

In the very last verse of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Christ tells his followers, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." *With* us always! I *believe* that, as strongly as I believe anything: that God is with us always, just as Jesus said and promised. There is *never* a time when God is **not** present. The *problem* lies in the fact that a majority of the time, **I** am not present. Oh, my body may be there, but **I** am somewhere else. Thoughts are continuously running through my head which have nothing to do with where I am in a present place at a present moment; and therefore I cannot *see* God **in** the present place and moment. *Because* of all the **distractions**, *my* eyes, like those of the disciples in the Gospel, are kept from seeing that God is right there with me, walking with me.

You know what I'm talking about. God is there with you in every place, in each moment – you **believe** that; most *all* of us do! – and yet **you** are not present, **in** that moment, with God. Because of all our random thoughts, plans for tomorrow, worries about yesterday, trying to keep our life under control, our "eyes are kept from recognizing" God – and I don't simply mean our *physical* eyes, but the eyes of our heart, the eyes of our spirit, the eyes of our consciousness. God is *with* us; but **we** are not with *God*.

This is **my** *foundational* sin – and I would guess that it is so with **many** of us.

What we often don't realize is that, in the words of Richard Rohr, "Presence [being present] is a reciprocal or mutual encounter. One can **give** it, but it *has* to be **received**, or there is no presence." It is not enough that God is present with us; **we** have to be *aware of* and **receive** that Presence, or there is no encounter with God.

Frederick Buechner writes about this Gospel story: "How extraordinary to have eyes like that—eyes that look out at this world we live in but, more often than not, see everything *except* what matters most.

"In Florida, in the winter, there is a walk that I take early in the morning before breakfast most days. It doesn't go to Emmaus exactly, unless maybe that's exactly where it *does* go, but in the **literal** sense it takes me some three miles or so along a completely uninhabited stretch of the inland waterway that separates the barrier island where we live from the mainland. I do not know any place lovelier on the face of this planet, especially at that early hour when there is nobody else around and everything is so fresh and still. The waterway drifts by like a broad river. The ponds reflect the sky. There are wonderful birds—snow-white egrets and ibis, boat-tail grackles black as soot—and long, unbroken vistas of green grass and trees. It is a sight worth traveling a thousand miles to see, and yet there is no telling how *hard* I have to **struggle**, right there in the midst of it, actually to see it.

"What I do instead is think about things I have been doing and things I have to do. I think about people I love and people I do not know how to love. I think about

letters to write and things around the house to get fixed and old grievances and longings and regrets. I worry and dream about the future. That is to say, I get so lost in my own thoughts—and **lost** is just the word for it, as lost as you can get in a strange town where you don't know the way—that I have to struggle to see where I am, almost to **be** where I am. Much of the time I might as well be walking in the dark or ... with my eyes closed, those eyes that keep me from recognizing what is happening around me.

“But then every once in a while, by grace, I recognize at least some part of it. Every once in a while I recognize that I am walking in green pastures that call out to me to lie down in them, and beside still waters where my feet lead me. Sometimes in the way the breeze stirs the palms or the way a bird circles over my head, I recognize that even in the valley of the shadow of my own tangled thoughts there is something holy and unutterable seeking to restore my soul. I see a young man in a checked shirt riding a power mower, and when I wave my hand at him, he waves his hand at me and I am hallowed by his greeting. I see a flock of white birds rising, and my heart rises with them.” (Buechner, Frederick, 2009-03-17. *Secrets in the Dark*, p. 257. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.)

We have all experienced such grace-filled moments, which just seem to “happen” – moments when we clearly sense the Presence of God. But it is **also** possible to *Practice* the Presence of God, as Brother Lawrence says in his book by that title – a spiritual classic for almost 400 years. And the more we *practice* being present to the presence of God, the less we will experience having “our eyes kept from seeing,” like those disciples on the road to Emmaus.

This is where I – and several others of us in our parish – have found Centering Prayer helpful. (There are, of course, many *other* types of prayer that help us be present to the presence of God, but this is the form that I know and practice.) Fr. Thomas Keating says that Centering Prayer involves our “intent to consent to the presence of God and God’s action within us.” Our intent to consent to the presence of God. By silent waiting, intentionally letting go of any thoughts that might enter my mind, any feelings, with the help of a simple word which is a symbol and reminder of my intent to consent to the presence of God, I spend 20 minutes twice a day quietly sitting in God’s Presence. God *is* present at **all** times – *that* I believe with all my heart; but most of the time, I am not **aware** of God’s presence. Through Centering Prayer, I allow whatever is keeping my eyes from recognizing God to fall away, so that I may see God and be present to God, if only for a small fraction of the time I am sitting and praying. (And some days it seems I can *never* stop the mental chatter!) And those of us who practice this type of prayer hope that *as* we practice, that small fraction of the time we recognize God’s presence might gradually grow larger – not only in our prayer time, but as we go about our day – and we might see Jesus as he comes to walk with us on our life’s journey.

“What we’re doing in contemplative prayer,” writes Richard Rohr, “is learning, quite simply, how to be present. That is the only way to encounter any other

presence, including God in prayer, Jesus in the Eucharist, and Jesus in others. The change is all and always on *our* side. God is present everywhere all the time. There really is not much point in arguing about IF and HOW Jesus is present in the bread and wine [of the Eucharist]; simply **be** present *yourself* and you will know all that you need to know. It is an exercise in surrender and presence from your side alone.

“We know that God is always *given* from **God’s** side, but *we* have to learn how to **receive** such total givenness, which is a very vulnerable position for humans.”
(citation lost)

And yet it is a critical position to hold – *if* we are to receive God’s gift of Divine Presence.

And so I would encourage each of you to *practice* being present. Take 10 minutes and be *present* this week with one person, one animal, one flower, one tree, and nothing else -- and in so doing, you will *exercise* your ability to be present to God. If you would like to learn some helpful “presence” exercises and practices, please feel free to talk with me or Mike and Linda Smith (when they get back from Illinois) or anyone in our Centering Prayer group – Walt and Ann, Bud and Carol Ann, pb, Nancy, Kathleen, Jodi, Dhiana, John and Mary Metz, Sally Plaster, Audrie... I know I am missing some! It would be wonderful if you decided to *join* either our morning or evening Centering Prayer group! But whatever practice of “being present” you choose, keep in mind our Gospel story, and how easy it is for our eyes to be kept from recognizing the presence of God, just like those two disillusioned disciples on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus came – unrecognized – to walk with them.

AMEN