

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67
Psalm 45: 11-18
Romans 7:115-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
July 5th, 2020
The Rev. Karen Haig

Real Presence

This very familiar story sounds different to us today, doesn't it? 3 or 4 months ago I would have dropped into the story and probably would have heard it the way I always heard it. But today it sounds different – we certainly aren't engaging in deep and rich conversations with strangers – we can't even walk along the road next to our dearest friends. We're not eating and drinking together, not sharing communion together, not doing most of the familiar things we took for granted until not so long ago. But we've been in this other reality for long enough now, that I am beginning to see things in new ways. And while we can't do things the way we've always done them, we can still do many of the things that matter deeply to us, things that help us remember ourselves as the Body of Christ, the church, gathered differently, but still gathered.

More than one biblical scholar has recognized the Emmaus story as a story that gives us the form for our worship. People gather, with Jesus in their midst, scripture is told and interpreted, we come to table together to hear the story of salvation, to give thanks and to break bread, and then we go out into the world to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen! We can't do that in the way we've done that in the past today, but if we pay attention, I think we will find that this story shows us we can still do those things... we can still gather with Jesus in our midst, still proclaim and interpret scripture, still give thanks and break bread and share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Emmaus story begins in deep sadness – hopelessness, really – and that is something we've had some experience of these last few weeks. People are moody and can't say why. Some of us find ourselves sitting and staring and suddenly realizing we have tears running down our cheeks. Even the ones who love being home, love being alone, love not having to engage the world are more tender than usual and more vulnerable. People have short fuses, not all the time, but some of the time. It's hard. It seems endless. It should have been better by now. I'm pretty sure that's how Cleopas and his friend felt. They were walking down that road at the end of the third day. The third day. The day it all should have happened.

All of the followers in Jerusalem expected to see Jesus again, but he'd appeared to only a few, and not to these two. Oh, they'd heard the testimony of the women but it all seemed like hearsay and they'd been emotionally so on edge that they simply couldn't contain their disappointment. And so the two weary disciples sadly set out for home, a seven mile walk back to the old life – the life without Jesus.

But they couldn't go back to their old life – not really. They had been changed by their time with him. There had been hard times, but all along, they'd had such high hopes – hopes of a new life a whole new world in fact – the Kingdom of heaven Jesus had called it. But it seemed that Kingdom really wasn't going to come. The three days had passed. The promises and prophecies hadn't come true. No resurrection. No Jesus. I know these feelings – I think you do too.

A much-needed job doesn't materialize. An illness devastates body and spirit. The hope of a sublime lifetime of love turns to benign neglect or worse. The promise of a deep and rich life lived in God fades away as we neglect our prayers and no longer see the holy in everything. And with each of these disappointments, these seemingly broken promises, we too try to go back "home," back to the old life, the regular life, the normal life, the life that isn't so rich because we've traded hoping for anything wonderful or beautiful or life-changing, for the assurance we'll never be disappointed again.

When things are too hard, we sometimes stop trusting in God's promises even when they are right in front of us. Jesus, God's most beautiful promise was right there with Cleopas and his friend. But even when Jesus was opening the scriptures up for them, showing them all the signs that pointed to the risen Christ and God's kingdom already come among them, they didn't recognize him. How many times do we miss Jesus when he is right in front of us?

No wonder they were sad. No wonder they'd given up hope. No wonder they were resigned to life as it used to be. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. We had hoped..." Those two weary travelers were so steeped in their sadness that they didn't notice the stranger who came alongside them. It seems he'd been walking with them for a while before they even registered his presence. "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him," Luke tells us. When they finally did notice him, he asked them what they'd been talking about. They described the events of the past few days, all the while wondering how on earth this stranger could have missed the news? Everybody was talking about it. For some, it was all condemnation and crucifixion. But those two followers thought it was the end of their story, even in the face of the empty tomb.

"Oh how foolish you are" Jesus had said to them. "how foolish you are and slow of heart..." And there it is... when Jesus is standing right in front of us but we don't recognize him, it is because we are slow of heart. Not slow of mind or wit. Slow of heart. These two disciples, whose eyes were kept from recognizing Jesus would have recognized him had their hearts been open. But their hearts had been so broken that they only wanted to wall them off. An open heart is a vulnerable heart – we know this. And still, it is only vulnerable, open hearts that recognize the risen Christ...

It was the bread. Their hearts cracked open when Jesus took the bread, gave thanks for it, broke it and gave it to them... they'd seen him do it so many times before – when he fed the

multitudes, when he sat at table with his friends, when he ate the Passover meal. It was the bread. Jesus' particular way of holding the bread and blessing it, the familiar and tender tearing and that generous and heartfelt giving that nourished everyone at the table – they recognized it and they recognized him. We recognize him too, when bread is broken in that particular way. We know it to be a sign of Christ's abiding presence with us, and these days, we are missing that sign.

We used to come to church to make Eucharist together, and it was a little bit like this story. We came together in whatever state we were in, glad or sad, disappointed or gratified, often caught up in the stories we told ourselves about the world as we defined it. Like the travelers on the road to Emmaus, we would come to church and experience both Word – those same stories Jesus lived and told – and Sacrament – the real presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine. I used to take for granted that the way to know Jesus was to gather together around a common table, praying common prayers and drinking from a common cup, physically gathered as the body of Christ.

But in these last couple of months, I have come to understand that being in each other's physical presence isn't necessary for us to experience each other's real presence. We certainly experience Jesus' real presence in the absence of HIS physical body. It is not lost on me that the Emmaus "Eucharist" that blessing, breaking, giving and recognizing all happened around a kitchen table, in somebody's home in a little Palestinian village. When we hear those words, blessed, broken, given for you... when we see those gestures, the raised hands, the bread tearing, the cup being offered, we naturally think of the sacrament. But I think we can also recognize blessing, breaking and sharing as the way Jesus provides the abundant meal and the abundant life he wants for all of us.

This recognition doesn't diminish the sacrament and doesn't diminish our longing for it, either. It will be a glorious day when we can make Eucharist together again, here in this place. But we do need to remember that while Jesus is truly present in the bread and the wine of the sacrament, he is also truly present in each one of us. Blessing, breaking, giving – we can all do that. As it turns out, every meal can be sacramental if we recognize that it has the potential to mediate the grace and presence of God. That doesn't make every meal a sacrament, because sacraments, given by Christ, necessarily mediate God's grace. But what we do in our own homes can surely be sacramental – filled with the real presence of Christ and full of God's grace.¹ God uses the stuff of our everyday lives – bread, wine, oil and water – to show us that Christ – the sacred – is everywhere and always present. And we'll see that, when we look at the world with the eyes of our hearts. Amen.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2020/04/easter-3-a-poignancy-and-possibility/>