

Luke 24.13-35

The Walk to Emmaus

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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?' ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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.' ²⁵Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?' ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.



Emmaus, the place we hear about in the Gospel story today, was just an ordinary village not too far from Jerusalem - about 11 km, so maybe 2 or 3 hours walk.

This vividly told incident happens actually on Easter Sunday - so 2 weeks ago, as it were. The dramatic events of Jesus' death two days ago are still very new and raw; and these two disciples have not seen Jesus. They were not in that upper room that we heard about in last Sunday's readings, so are still deeply shocked, mourning, and, most likely, terrified. They have taken the first opportunity to go home, because of course the day before, Saturday, was the Sabbath, and they would not have been allowed by the law to walk such a long way.

As they walk, Jesus is suddenly there; and as seems to be the case with these post-resurrection appearances, they don't recognize him.

I have no idea why; there have been many different attempts to explain this, but let us today simply accept that that is how it is. The 2 people, walking desolately away from Jerusalem, are confused, unhappy, frightened, and lost. Lost, that is, in a spiritual sense; they know exactly where they are going in a physical sense. To Emmaus; home, and away from all the terror and threat that Jerusalem now means to them.

So first of all, Jesus walks with them, and explains once again the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. Verse 27 said: Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. But even so, they don't see, they don't understand; but they do extend hospitality to this stranger, welcoming him into their home. It has been a long, long day – so much has happened; and as they say to the stranger, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.'



So despite their weariness and fear, they still extend a welcome to this stranger, which is rather wonderful – perhaps a tribute to traditions of hospitality that are still alive and well, at least in parts of the Middle East and the Holy Land.

And then the miracle happens.



The stranger takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them, and they see Jesus before their eyes. This gesture, that must have been familiar; these words of blessing, the hands giving them the broken bread – all becomes clear, and they see that it is Jesus.



This is another painting by Caravaggio – last week, we saw his wonderful painting of Thomas, putting his hand in Jesus' side. And here Caravaggio captures another moment of recognition and transformation, just like that: the disciples suddenly recognize that this figure, who seems to look very different to the Jesus they know, is the Lord, after all. Just to note, Cleopas, on the right of this image, is wearing a scallop shell – the sign that pilgrims wore in the Middle Ages, particularly those who had been on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

What then? Despite their exhaustion, they get up and go all the way back to Jerusalem, all those 11km! ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Who exactly Cleopas was, and who his companion (possibly his wife), we don't know, and we hear nothing more of what these two people did afterwards. But we do see clearly from this passage that we have just heard, that the encounter they have with the risen, living Jesus utterly transforms them, just as we heard about Thomas and the other disciples last week. From these tired and terrified people, so desperate to get away from Jerusalem to safety in

Emmaus they are renewed, revitalized; they set off back to Jerusalem within the hour, eager now to get back to the other disciples and tell them what has just happened. And they even walk off through the darkness, not waiting for morning light.

What finally opened their eyes? The words Jesus spoke to them made their hearts burn within them; but it was in the breaking of the bread, the risen Lord sharing bread with them just as he had before his death; it was in the bread blessed by Jesus that they encountered him, living and real, that he was made known to them.

In Cleopas and his companion's case, it seemed as though Emmaus also was a place of safety, away from the chaos and violence Jerusalem represented; but then the knowledge of Christ, living and loving them still, sends them right back into the thick of things.



This, in the end, is about the presence of God, and the presence of Jesus Christ – in the words that burned in Cleopas and his companion's hearts, in the breaking of the bread, and in communities that gathered then, and gather now around the presence of the living Lord. What does that mean for us now, as community that is not able to gather physically, and that is not able to share in bread that is broken, or wine that is poured? How does it feel to be distanced one from another, and the presence of Jesus Christ at the table he invites us to? We must admit that it is painful, the inability to see, to touch, to share the peace in a hug, a handshake, a kiss; and to share the Body of Christ in the body of the Church. For the moment we recognize Christ's presence in other ways – in the care for one another, in the joy of seeing each other on a screen, in the self-sacrifice of health workers, teachers, retail workers and so on. But this will pass, and we will, soon, I hope and pray, join once again in the church that is gathered around Word and Sacrament, gathered as a company of saints and sinners, brought together in and through the love of Christ. We long for that, and hope for this dawn to come soon.



Let us finish with another expression of hope in the darkness;
a sonnet by Malcolm Guite, called Emmaus 2.

We thought that everything was lost and gone,
Disaster on disaster overtook us
The night we left our Jesus all alone
And we were scattered, and our faith forsook us.
But oh that foul Friday proved far worse,
For we had hoped that he had been the one,
Till crucifixion proved he was a curse,
And on the cross our hopes were all undone.

*Oh foolish foolish heart why do you grieve?
Here is good news and comfort to your soul:
Open your mind to scripture and believe
He bore the curse for you to make you whole
The living God was numbered with the dead
That He might bring you Life in broken bread.*