

A Heart Warming Experience
Luke 24:13-32
May 19, 2019 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

A few weeks back, I spoke of Thomas, the poor fellow who will forever be dubbed “the doubting Thomas.” You may remember that Thomas was not with the other disciples that first time the resurrected Christ appeared to them; and, we commented that Thomas was left to wonder, to doubt, to wrestle with the reports of the resurrection for eight days, before Jesus finally appeared.

Today, in Luke’s Gospel, we have another story of people perplexed, confused, wondering what has happened. Two disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus, and they are talking to each other. Jesus comes to walk beside them; but they don’t recognize him. So they relay their confusion – the fantastic stories they are hearing. They tell of his being condemned to death and crucified. Then there’s the story of the women. They went to the tomb and found it empty. But more than that, they reported seeing the vision angels that told them that he is alive. Others went to the tomb and also found it empty. What are we to make of all this?

Friends, this is pretty fantastic “stuff.” As I ask three weeks ago if you wouldn’t be doubting like Thomas, today I ask if you would not be perplexed, wondering, talking, trying to make sense of all this – just as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And just like our Thomas story, Jesus seeks to clear things up. He’s a bit critical of the disciples, saying: “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have written.” But then he goes on to explain the scriptures, “starting with Moses and going through all the Prophets.” (Oh how the biblical scholars in my world would love to know what he said. But maybe it’s not so much what he said as the way he said it.)

When they got to Emmaus, he acted as if he was going on ahead, but they urged him to stay with them, because it was getting late. So he went into the house with them, and took his place at the table. He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them; and their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

Friends, there are a couple teaching moments for us in this story. First, two disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus. One is named Cleopas. Who is the other one? The other disciple is never named; and I submit that is intentional. If you were here on Good Friday, you heard me speak of a certain young man in Mark’s Gospel who followed Jesus when everyone else forsook him and fled. Also, in Mark, that same simple young man is the one to announce the resurrection to the women. That young man is never identified; and I told you that I believe that young man is a “place holder” for you and for me. We are the ones called to follow where others flee; and we are the ones who are called to announce the good news of the resurrection.

Well today, I believe that “other disciple” plays the same role. We are the other disciple walking the road to Emmaus. We are the other disciple struggling to

understand what the crucifixion and resurrection are all about; and we are the other disciple whom Jesus comes to walk beside. And what does Jesus do when he walks beside the disciples... He explains the scriptures, Moses and the Prophets, to them.

Friends, the Bible is hugely important to our faith. John Wesley said that every decision we make should be made on the basis of four things which later scholars have dubbed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Scripture is the overarching basis for all our decisions.

Now, particularly in light of the current division within our denomination, I must be quick to say that giving scripture primary importance does not mean that we should take every word literally and apply every word literally to twenty-first century life. Let us not leave Reason out of the picture. I fully believe every word of the Bible is true. I also believe that it must be interpreted in terms of its historical context, and I do not believe in “proof-texting” the Bible. That is lifting a couple verses out of their literary context and applying them to situations different from the context in which they were originally presented.

Recently, we’ve had a lot of “proof-texting” going on, as some of our more conservative members have used the words that Jesus said about marriage to claim it was a condemnation of homosexuality when, in fact, when Jesus was speaking about marriage, he was condemning divorce. I might also say that we need to consider divorce in its historical context. In Jesus time, to divorce a woman was to condemn her to a life of poverty and prostitution. Of course Jesus was opposed to divorce. Now again, don’t get me wrong, I believe that divorce should always be a last resort; but I’m not going to apply first century standards to the twenty-first century life.

So how do we find the truth in scripture without taking every word literally? We study the scriptures. We open our hearts and our minds to the scriptures; and studying the scriptures means more than reading the scriptures. Studying the scriptures does not mean memorizing the scriptures. Studying the scriptures means placing yourself in the story, in the time and the place in which it was written.

It has been my pleasure, in the eight years I have been here, to offer several regular Bible studies. I sincerely hope that will continue after I leave. Let me also note that The Disciple Bible Study series, is still an excellent curriculum; and it is well structured. It does not need to be taught by a pastor. If my successor is not able to teach, there are any number of lay people in this congregation that can assume that role.

But let’s get back to Emmaus. Jesus opened the scriptures to Cleopas and to the other disciple. Jesus opens the scriptures to us. Scripture is as important to us, as it was to John Wesley. But the disciples did not recognize him until he broke the bread. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them.” Sound familiar? There are the words of institution for our communion ritual. “Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and give it to the disciples saying ‘This is my body, broken for you.’”

I hope that we experience Jesus with us, every time we celebrate communion. I hope we recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. We call it communion because we come together, we commune with each other, and we commune with Christ. Again it is in our liturgy, “Lord make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” Indeed, we are invited to be “the other disciple” recognizing Christ in the breaking of the bread.

And this brings us to the final verse. . . “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

This coming Friday is May 24th. May 24th is a special day for United Methodists. It was on May 24, 1738 that John Wesley wrote in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Our Emmaus disciples hearts burned within them, as Jesus explained the scriptures. Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed as the lector was reading Luther’s Preface to Romans. Has your heart been strangely warmed?

I hope you don’t read the Bible like just another book. I hope you read it with an eye toward discovery; and I hope, in those moments of discovery, your heart will be warmed. Still, more than that, I hope your heart is truly warmed every time we break bread together, every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Holy Spirit has a wonderful way of warming hearts. We only need to open our hearts to let the warming begin.

Let us pray,

Holy Lord Jesus,
Come to us this day as you came to the disciples on the road,
walk with us and help us understand your words for us.
Open our hearts, and warm our hearts,
that we might truly experience your love,
that we might truly share your love with your people everywhere.
Amen.

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