

Third Sunday of Easter – April 15, 2018

Luke 24:36b-48

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

This is the third week in a row that we read the ending of one of the Gospels and have an opportunity to see in retrospect what the evangelists are doing with their accounts. Or maybe it would be better to say, we get to see how God is at work through their accounts on our behalf. Each one connects us “latter-day” disciples with the original message in a similar way. On Easter Sunday, we saw how Mark draw us into the story to make *us* the witnesses that the frighten women at the tomb fail to be. At least at first. I last week’s Gospel reading we saw how John makes the signs recorded in his book a touch point for faith in Jesus that leads to the life he promises. And here in our Gospel reading this morning, Luke makes the scriptures the vehicle for connecting us with that life-giving promise. Actually, it’s a little bit more complicated than that in Luke, but I’m going to focus this morning on the crucial part the scriptures play in Luke’s understanding of how God is at work after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

What’s important to say right from the start is what Luke is *not* advocating in his emphasis on scripture. It is not quite the same thing as call on us to be a “Bible-believing church.” At least not in the way that it’s usually meant these days – regarding the Bible as guide to morality, or as a set of propositions necessary to accept for entrance into heaven. Reading the Bible as history, or journalism, or science. But the Bible is a collection of documents through which God speaks. We just need a little help, and a little persistence, to catch just what it is that God is really saying. And not everything in the Bible is equally important. Some of it doesn’t even apply to us any more. The ritual and dietary laws, for instance, which show up all over the first five books of the Bible, especially Leviticus. Pork would be off limits if we thought we had to follow everything in the Bible. No bacon! And no clams. No more clam chowder for me. And shrimp! Even worse. And women would have to cover their heads and have ritual baths. And we would have to stone disobedient children. And we’d have to stop wearing polyester and cotton blends. And so on. You get the picture.

The key here in our Gospel reading from Luke is Jesus opening the minds of the disciples to understand the scriptures. And for you to really appreciate that I’m going to have to take you back into the story that comes before this one that make it even clearer what it means for Jesus to open their minds to understand the scriptures. That story we don’t get every year. (It is appointed for reading for the *evening* service on Easter Sunday every year. But I don’t know of any churches that have an Easter Evening service. It shows up in the Sunday morning readings only once every three years.) It’s the story of the two followers of Jesus who are walking along the road from Jerusalem to a town called Emmaus on the evening after Jesus’ resurrection. They are talking about everything that has just happened with Jesus – his arrest, crucifixion, and then the empty tomb – and they are disappointed. Even with that news of the empty tomb. They’ve decided that Jesus couldn’t have been God’s agent after all – God’s promised Messiah. That’s when Jesus joins them. Only they don’t realize it’s Jesus. And Luke doesn’t tell us why they don’t recognize him, or how it could *be* that they don’t recognize him. But they don’t. After they tell him what they’ve been talking about, Jesus then tells them how “foolish” they are, and how slow they are to believe the prophets. And then comes this crucial verse. Listen to what it says. “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” Two things to note here. The scriptures are the scriptures because (1.) they are God’s word – that what the focus on the prophets means, and (2.) because this word,

this message, connects us to God's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection in the person of Jesus Christ. These things about Jesus that the two disciples were talking about on the road are the focal point of God's ongoing mission to save humankind that began way back in the 3rd chapter of Genesis. Or maybe it would be better to say, way back at the beginning of time. This is what the Emmaus disciples realize when Jesus opens the scriptures to them.

But that's not the end of that episode. They are greatly affected by what Jesus has to say, but they still don't recognize him. It's only when they invite him to their home for dinner and he takes the bread and breaks it, as though he were the host (Because, of course, he is the host) – it's only then that they recognize him. And at the same moment they recognize him, he disappears. They are left only with the bread, and memory of him opening their minds to understand that he is the crucial content of the scriptures. Scripture and the meal. Does that sound familiar? It's what we do here every Sunday. And that's what Luke is getting at here. They rush back to Jerusalem and tell the other disciples. They talked about how their hearts burned within them as Jesus opened the scriptures to them, and how after this they recognized him in the breaking of the bread. The two things are not independent. All those things about Jesus throughout the scriptures that Jesus revealed led them to recognize him now in the breaking of the bread.

This episode is for Luke's audience what the Thomas story was for John's. It's the story that tells us that the original disciples had no advantage over those who came after them just because they were able to see and hear and touch the Lord. We too, and all the followers of Jesus throughout history, have the very same access to Jesus through the opening of the scriptures, in which we learn to see how God's love and mercy have been at work throughout history to save us from the powers of sin, death, and evil and to reconcile us with God. We too, like first disciples, have the same opportunity to recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread, the communal meal of the gathered followers of Jesus that forms us into his body for the sake of the world.

The passage we have before us this morning is really just an addendum to the Emmaus story. Even after the witness of the Emmaus disciples, the other disciples are startled and terrified when Jesus finally appears to them in the flesh. They still cannot believe, in spite of everything that has happened, that God is really working to undo the powers of sin, death, and evil. So Jesus shows them that he's not a ghost by eating some food. You just have to roll with that. It was the test for ghosts in the ancient world. And then he opens their minds to understand the scriptures. And we know now what that means. It means that God is all about Jesus, and Jesus is all about love, and mercy, and forgiveness of sin, and reconciliation with God and one another.

What Luke is doing with this ending to his Gospel is helping the church throughout the ages to see the scriptures – both old and new – as the foundation for the community that gathers around them. In such communities it is Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, who opens our minds to understand the scriptures as the story of God's ongoing love for the world in him. Then we recognize him also in the breaking of the bread, in the community gathered around word and sacrament, and in then also in the world around us. The centrality of the scriptures, rightly understood by the God's grace, mean that we are not asked to find a way to fit Jesus into *our* lives and make God relevant to *us*. Rather it is Jesus who is drawing us into GOD'S story – and makes us relevant to God's mission by calling us to be agents of God's love and mercy in the world. Death is truly conquered in Jesus Christ, God and humankind are reconciled, and new life is breaking out all around, because Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!)

