2nd Sunday of Easter – April 27, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 24:13-35 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!) Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Every year on the second Sunday of Easter, for as long as I can remember going back to my childhood, the Gospel reading has been the story of Thomas and his difficulty believing the news of Jesus' resurrection. I never tire of that story. It's one of the foundational stories of the faith and a key passage for understanding what the Bible is for and how the church is meant to use it. So I wouldn't mind preaching on it again this year. But there is another Gospel reading that does something very similar to the Thomas story, and that is the story you just heard, the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus who came to recognize Jesus through the scriptures and in the breaking of the bread, the meal he shared with them. If we stick to the lectionary, we only get to hear that story once every three years on the 3rd Sunday of Easter. And for some reason they decided to stick that in the year of Matthew. I'm sure there was a good reason for that, but I don't know what it is. It seems to me that the perfect time to hear that reading is right now, the Sunday after we heard the resurrection story from Luke, because this story is the very next thing that happens in Luke. So here we are. I'm going against tradition here, and maybe starting a new one. If we were to stick with it, we'd get the Thomas story twice every three years, and the Emmaus story twice every three years. We'll see.

I usually give you three things to notice in the text I preach on. There are a lot more than three things in today's Gospel reading that I want us to see, but maybe they can be organized in to three layers, with the middle one being the longest because it is the focus. But I want to bracket that second layer in a way that gives broader context to what this is all about.

The first layer, then, that sets the stage, is a connection between this story and the Genesis 3 story of the man and the woman in the garden. That's the story of another meal, an unauthorized meal that has catastrophic consequences not only for humankind but for the whole creation. The man and the woman in that story are encouraged to follow their own agenda, to make their own choices about what is good and what is evil. They are encouraged, in other words, to play God. And when they follow through on this new plan that isn't God's, the change is signified by their eyes being opened and knowing something new after they eat the fruit. Here in the Emmaus story we have a man and maybe a woman. We don't know that it's a woman, but the door is wide open for that interpretation. Only one of them is named, and nowhere does it say they were two men. Just two of *them*. So it could very well be Cleopas and his wife. And what happens when they eat bread that Jesus takes and blesses and shares? Their eyes are opened and they know something new. They learn that this stranger is Jesus. The words are almost exactly the same as the words in the Genesis story, and I think Luke wants his readers to make that connection. He wants us to see this story as a kind of undoing of that first meal.

But this is not just about that meal at Emmaus, and that brings us to the second layer here. As I said earlier, this story functions the same way the Thomas story does in connecting the church of the future with Jesus and the first disciples. One of the early crises of the church was the realization that Jesus' return was not going to be as soon as expected, and that the original generation disciples was dying off. Their witness needed to be written down. But they also needed to address the idea that the original disciples had a significant advantage over subsequent generations. It's easy to believe in Jesus' resurrection when you saw him die and then saw him alive again. It's easy to trust him when he speaks to you face to face, in the flesh as it were. But only a few people got to have that experience. Lucky them! Both Luke and John in their

respective final stories are effectively saying, “Not so!” The original disciples had exactly the same trouble believing in the resurrection and in understanding and trusting Jesus as those who never met him and just heard the story. Both the Thomas and Emmaus stories show us that there was a process, that coming to faith even for the original disciples took time. But this Emmaus story is more explicit in connecting that process of theirs to ours. Specifically it presents us here with the ancient pattern of Christian worship that goes back to the very beginning of the church, as later described in Luke’s sequel, the Book of Acts, as apostolic teaching, the breaking of the bread, and prayer. This whole encounter fits that pattern. It starts with Jesus teaching them everything in the Scriptures about himself and continues with the meal. You have to read to the end of the chapter to get the prayer part, but it’s there. This is precisely what the church has been doing ever since: reading and expounding on scripture, sharing the meal of holy communion, and responding to these gifts of word and sacrament in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.

But it’s even better than that. Notice how this process works, how it changes these disciples. The story starts off with the two of them on the road, talking about their disappointment with how things had gone with Jesus. They had had high hopes for him. They thought that he was the Messiah, the promised king who would liberate them from foreign oppression and “make Israel great again.” That was their agenda for him that Jesus confronts and challenges when he calls them “foolish and slow to believe.” Harsh! But that is our age-old, ongoing struggle with God, isn’t it? It’s why we begin our services with confession and forgiveness, or with remembering our baptism, which embodies God’s forgiveness. The process then continues with Jesus leading them through the Scriptures, their Bible, and showing how his death and resurrection are the focal point of God’s saving activity in the world. This is what we’re doing in our reading of scripture, in preaching, and the creed. Then comes the meal, begun with a blessing, which is prayer. All of this results in a remarkable transformation. It opens the disciples’ eyes and burns in their hearts. That might not be your experience every Sunday, but that is the goal of our gathering around word and sacrament. They are meant to do something to us, to transform and reorient us into partnership in God’s work in the world. Finally the disciples rush out into the darkness of the night to share the good news of their encounter with the risen Lord – which of course is what we’re doing when we are sent out in peace to serve the Lord, to proclaim the good news, to remember the poor, and so on.

One more thing, that third layer… There’s another story that happens on the road in Luke’s Gospel right back at the beginning, at the end of chapter 2. It’s another story of not knowing where Jesus is and then finding him. Remember? He was twelve, the only story we have of Jesus as a child, and he gets left behind on a family trip to Jerusalem. And where was he? In the temple, his Father’s house, as he said. Fast forward to our story at the end of the Gospel, and where is Jesus to be found? No longer in the temple but on the road, “on the way,” with his disciples in word and sacrament, transforming and empowering us to bear witness to his cross and resurrection for the sake of our benighted world, proclaiming with our lips and with our lives that Christ is risen, alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia)