

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!)

Last week the guitar service played Abide With Me for the prelude, and I then felt moved to tell you in my welcoming remarks about the connection of that hymn to the story I just read to you from Luke. I also said that unfortunately we get that story only once every three years, and I didn't know when we'd get it next. Okay, so I outed myself. I had not yet looked as far ahead as this Sunday. But I'm going to put that down to recovering from Holy Week. In any event, it's a week later now, I have made my annual pilgrimage to Valparaiso University for the Institute of Liturgical Studies, and I am thoroughly refreshed now, especially thanks to all of the wonderful worship services that I got to participate in but did not have to prepare or lead.

Christ is risen indeed and we're kind of used to the idea now. Liturgically speaking, we've had a couple of weeks to let it sink in. In more literal terms, it's been couple millennia for us and our ancestors in the faith, all combined. But for these two disciples on the road to Emmaus at the end of Luke's Gospel it's still the same day. And a lot has happened on this day. But until Jesus shows up on the road with them in the midst of their journey, they are at a loss. Try as they might – and they are trying when Jesus interrupts them – they just can't process what has happened to them and their friends. I mean, what do you do when someone tells you they found the tomb of your dead friend empty, that they saw angels who told them he had risen from the dead? Would you believe it? Well, they didn't. They thought it was just the women being hysterical. And so they're heading home. They've had enough.

This story in Luke ultimately has the same goal as John's story about Thomas that we heard last week, but it is a little bit more subtle. These two disciples on the road to Emmaus are on a journey. It's a seven-mile walk home from Jerusalem with an unrecognized companion. Then it's a seven-mile run back to Jerusalem to share the astonishing news of Jesus's appearance to them. That's a good two hours walking, and maybe an hour running, for a good runner. But in addition to being on a physical journey, they are on a spiritual one as well, a journey from sorrow and regret, through recognition and amazement, to overwhelming joy and lives that will never be the same, all in the course of a single day.

The journey of these two disciples is also the church's journey. I think Luke clearly meant to convey that. And that's why this is one of my favorite Bible stories. In the past I have tended to focus in on the ending, how Jesus revealed himself in the breaking of the bread, which is clearly a reference to the church's practice of Holy Communion. One important point that Luke is trying to get across here is that in the church's sharing of the words of Scripture and the Communion meal, disciples who never met Jesus during his earthly ministry have the same access to him that the original disciples had, in all the ways that matter. But the breaking of the bread is not the only thing that is happening here. It is a final step in a series of things they experienced in Jesus' presence on their way home.

And what were those things? First, the disciples were lamenting what had been lost. They had had high hopes for Jesus. They had ideas for how he was going to make Israel a great nation again as the promised Messiah sent from God. But now that dream had been dashed, and they would give anything to have it back again. If only they could go back and stop Jesus from dying... The disciples were living in the past because they had no hope for the future they imagined, and no vision for an alternative.

Second, something had been happening as they walked along talking to this stranger they did not yet know was Jesus. Something was happening as he led them through the Scriptures during those two hours or so down that road. Something was happening that they didn't notice happening until later. But it was happening. Their hearts were burning as Jesus spoke, as he showed how all of God's activity throughout all of history had been focused on saving humankind from sin, death, and evil, and how all of that had been leading up to Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection.

Finally, after Jesus reveals himself in the meal, everything comes together for them. Everything is now cast in a new light – their past, their future, and their present. I don't imagine they had great clarity on the details just yet. But I think that in that moment they sensed that everything had now changed. Jesus *was* the Messiah, and now he is alive again. He was with them all along on their journey, and he would be with them again. They do not wait until morning when it will be safe to travel. They head straight out into the danger of the night to take the news of their encounter with Jesus back to the other disciples, only to find that Jesus had been busy appearing to them as well. What could be next?

Just as with the Thomas story last week, so all three of these phases in the disciples' experience on the road to Emmaus have been lived out in the church throughout time, and are being lived out among us right now. The first of these phases, lament, is particularly relevant to our context, where church attendance and church influence are declining. We too often find ourselves mourning the loss of our former glory, and wishing we could get back to the way it was before.

But as we fret and worry and lament, Jesus comes among us, we who are gathered here in his name. Jesus is among us, right here, right now, in the reading and expounding of Scripture, and in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, reminding us of God's love, conveying God's forgiveness, and proclaiming God's victory over sin, death, and evil. This is very important to remember especially when we are discouraged and disappointed. Just as it was with the Emmaus Disciples, Jesus is with us on our journey, present in our gatherings, a companion on the way, even before we realize it, before we recognize his presence, before we have made sense of the burning in our hearts kindled by his gospel promise.

And then we are granted moments of revelation, when we recognize and experience the risen Christ among us, and all of our encounters with God's word and sacraments in our lives come together to give us comfort in the present, hope for the future, and a joyful, compelling desire to live out the gospel in our lives and make it real in the lives of others as well.

All of these phases of the disciples' experience – lament, fear, surprise, burning conviction, recognition, joy, and expectation – all of these churn together in our lives, moving from one to another and back again. But through all of them, Jesus is with us, when we feel it and when we don't, when we're aware and when we're oblivious. Our task as the church is to remind ourselves of that presence, to persist in proclaiming the promise of the resurrection, and to share the hope that is within us with the world around us. May God strengthen and empower us for that task, little by little, day by day, throughout the journey of our lives. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the life-changing good news that Christ is risen, alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!)