

Here For One Another

Luke 24:13-35

Third Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2011

Whitefish UMC

- ✦ Two people, companions, walking down the road. Maybe two men, perhaps a man and a woman—a husband and wife, a mother and a son. One’s name we know, the other stays anonymous. They have had quite an eventful few days. First Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and then it went all downhill from there.
- ✦ They are followers of Jesus of Nazareth, the One in whom they had placed all their hopes for a better world—not just for them, but for all those who longed for the Messiah. Yet their hopes had been dashed in the days leading up to Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.
- ✦ Now they are walking the road to Emmaus. They have lost their hope and their faith. They are not looking for Jesus; in fact they might be looking down at their feet, because when Jesus joins them, they fail to recognize him.
- ✦ They are absorbed in grief and tell Jesus the story about himself! Jesus joins in their conversation and before they know it, they are sharing a meal together. Then he vanishes into thin air!
- ✦ The story of the two companions on the road to Emmaus reminds us that this is a world marked by human loss—and human hospitality. And we are part of both worlds. We live in a time of instant global information. And sometimes the injustices and pain of the world threaten to overwhelm our human sensitivities.

- ✦ They make us want to retreat and withdraw, to walk through life with OUR heads down, too. But on the other hand, we feel as if we should, we want to, do something, but we don't know exactly what it is or how to respond.
- ✦ One pastor recalls a poem about the birth of a premature baby girl whose life was so tenuous, her parents spent the first week of her life not knowing whether to grieve or celebrate. The poem ends “with every report, I am smiling and grieving, grieving and smiling.”
- ✦ We find ourselves grieving and smiling every day. There is so much beauty and terror in the world—it's almost impossible not to do both. And that's how those two on the road must have felt. Caught between the old life they loved and knew everything about, and heading toward something new, not fully known or created yet, which they couldn't begin to grasp or imagine.
- ✦ Life is indeed full of grieving and celebrating. On Mother's Day, we know this to be especially true. You know that I have just returned from our son's wedding, and it was such a blessed occasion. Afterward, people told me I was beaming all throughout the ceremony, which I officiated. I experienced our son and our new daughter (in law) radiating love, too, and we must have been reflecting it off each other. So this is a marvelous Mother's Day for me, because now I have the daughter I always longed for!!
- ✦ But as I talked with dear friends about preparing for this Sunday when I returned, I spoke about how challenging it is to preach on Mother's Day. Our friends looked startled and asked why. I softly said that for many, Mother's Day is one of the most painful times of year. It is for our niece, Anya, who lost her mother a few years ago. It's

- excruciating for mothers who grieve the death of a child. And it's a struggle for those whose mothers were far less than the Hallmark card variety.
- ✦ And the question for us is, children of mothers, mothers ourselves or longing to be mothers or for mothers, how do we who want to follow Jesus live with grace and hope amidst it all?
 - ✦ The two people on the road to Emmaus, joined by their companion Jesus, give us clues.
 - ✦ First, rather than going it alone, Cleopas—the disciple we know—is joined by a companion. They share their confusion and grief. And when someone who appears to be a stranger approaches, they don't turn him away—they invite him to join them and tell him their story.
 - ✦ And as evening falls, they invite the stranger to have supper with them. Hospitality brings them out of their grief, and when Jesus breaks and blesses bread for them, in a way that reminds them of the time he fed the multitudes, in a way that powerfully reminds them of the way he had broken bread and shared it with his disciples on the night he was arrested—as he broke the bread, they recognized him. It was Jesus.
 - ✦ On Jesus' part, did you notice that he joins the travelers right where they are—amidst their grief and despair? Remember—they have heard about the resurrection reports—they even repeat them to Jesus—but it's pretty clear they haven't really absorbed them or really believe them—otherwise why would they be so distressed?
 - ✦ But he doesn't chastise them for their failure to believe—he doesn't tell them to stop complaining. He just walks with them, offering his presence and his companionship. He meets them where they are.

- ✦ Real relationships do all those things—offer companionship in the midst of grief; offer hospitality when it’s needed; accept us just where we are and don’t try to make us into somebody else in the midst of our distress.
- ✦ So one of the things that this wonderful story is about is spiritual relationships. Wendy Wright, in her lovely book *The Rising*, tells about Gregory the Great, the sixth century monk who became pope and who is remembered for his needed reforms.
- ✦ Gregory seized on the moment in the story when the disciples recall, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road?” For Gregory, human beings feel and find God as presence primarily in relationships—especially in those that have the love of God at their core.
- ✦ Our hearts burn because we long for God, our home, our end. When we touch other hearts aware of their yearning, we in fact touch something of God-with-us-now. For Gregory, the love of companions in the spirit *is* the love of God experienced in this life.
- ✦ And isn’t this what being an Easter church is all about? Not only are we called to serve others, we are invited to be sustained, challenged, and loved into the image and likeness of God by each other.
- ✦ Wendy Wright tells of a time when she was asked to compile results of a survey of people asked to describe their spiritual lives. Among several questions, they were asked to tell about their most powerful experiences of God. She expected that most people would speak of experiences in nature or in deep prayer or alone.
- ✦ Instead, over 90% claimed their most notable experience of God had occurred in relationship with someone else—in a friendship, with a

spouse or children or parents, in a faith-sharing group or worshipping community, with a coworker, or a pastoral minister.

- ✦ And of course the implication is—WE, TOO, CAN BE AN INSTRUMENT FOR OTHERS TO EXPERIENCE GOD THROUGH US!
- ✦ Craig Barnes, pastor of the National Presbyterian church in Washington, D. C., writes: “the question that Easter asks of us is not “do we believe in the resurrection?”...that’s not the point. What the Gospels ask is not, “Do you believe” but “Have you encountered a risen Christ.?”
- ✦ The two companions literally experience the risen Christ. And they make a decision—to trust a new reality, an amazing possibility. After meeting Jesus, they turn around and go back to Jerusalem, and although they are never heard from again, you know they join the twelve and tell them, as best as words can, about what happened to them, and they set out to live their lives in this brand new reality.
- ✦ Barbara Brown Taylor writes: “Deciding to trust the contours of this new reality...the companions themselves are changed. They stop hiding and start seeking. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains...they lay their hands on the sick. They defy the authorities. They never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and they became known for their glad and generous hearts.” (Journal for Preachers, Easter 2002)
- ✦ And that’s what we are for: to support and encourage one another to see the risen Christ in the ordinary events and people of our terrifying and wonderful life.

- ✦ As a pastor, it is a privilege to be called to the side of someone in the last days of life, even though it's also a sad time. One year, just as Mother's Day approached, the children of a mother dying of a wasting and grievous disease called and said their mother wanted to see me. The family wasn't part of the church, but that didn't matter. I went to the family home not knowing what to expect—a bedside confession, a lot of questions, a last request?
- ✦ When I arrived, the woman, chatted with me for awhile and then asked about a specific passage of scripture that speaks of love's endurance beyond death. We searched for her old Bible and then the passage. I read it to her, after she said that though she wasn't afraid to die, she wished she could stay around to enjoy her children and grandchildren for much more time.
- ✦ But it wasn't so much for her comfort that she wanted to find that passage—instead she wanted to leave it for her children as a way to provide comfort and assurance for them that her love would remain with them after her death.
- ✦ And is not also true that she wanted to know that her love would continue to make a difference in their lives and who they would become? Of course. I wished her peace as I left, and so she said something like:

*I know that God is with me and watching over my
life...Because of that I can be at peace and I can experience the
joy and hope of Easter no matter what.*

- ✦ And that's the way it is. **Being excited and scared about what lies ahead—full of grief and full of hope.** That's what being a Christian in this world is about. Thank God we have companions on the road to

- open our eyes and our hearts—through walking with us, through sharing hospitality and good bread, through meeting us where we are.
- ✦ And thank you, God, for the gift of yourself, and for Easter love and hope. May we, too, pass it on.
 - ✦ Let us close with a brief prayer from the Book of Common Prayer:
Lord Jesus stay with us, for evening is at hand and the day is done; be our companion on the way, kindle our hearts and awaken our hope, that we may know you as you are revealed to us in the breaking of the bread. Grant this for the sake of your love.
 - ✦ Amen.