

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, April 30, 2017

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

This is the Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God!

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger

in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Let us pray...Amen.

On Easter Sunday, some of us heard how Mary went to the tomb, early in the morning, and discovered that the tomb was empty. She ran to tell the disciples, who in turn, ran to the tomb to see for themselves. Peter, and another disciple eventually looked in and found only the cloths that had been used bind the Lord's body. Not knowing what else to do, they went home.

Mary, though, stayed. Stayed longer than the others. When she looked into the tomb, she saw two angels, and they asked her why she was weeping. Outside the tomb, she encountered Jesus, though at first she thought he was the gardener. She knew it was Jesus when he said her name.

Last week, some of us heard how the disciples were all gathered together except Thomas, and though the door was locked, Jesus appeared among them. He said 'Peace be with you', and they knew it was Jesus. Later that week, again all together, this time *with* Thomas, Jesus appeared to them a second time, also saying 'Peace be with you'. Jesus encouraged Thomas to put his finger in the holes in his hand, to put his hand in the hole in his side. When Thomas did that, he knew it was Jesus.

Today, we heard how the disciples were traveling on the road to a place called Emmaus. On the way, they encountered a stranger. Their conversation turned to the recent crucifixion of Jesus, and the stranger talked about scripture, and how it was all related. When they had reached their destination, they invited the stranger to stay with them, and when they sat down to eat, when they broke bread, they knew it was Jesus.

If those of us who struggle to be the church in the 21st century hope to know Jesus, scripture gives us a few hints on how we might make that happen: we'll have to wait around the empty tomb long enough to encounter Jesus, or we'll have to be patient to wait until he speaks our name, or we'll have to gather together enough times to share his peace with one another, saying 'Peace be with you' to each other, or, we have to be

close enough to Jesus to put our fingers in the holes in his hands, or put our hands in the hole in his side, or we have to gather to break bread together.

The community that the writer of John's Gospel was trying to reach was in a tough spot: they were cut off from their Jewish brothers and sisters due to their belief in Jesus as the son of God. They were cut off from their Christian brothers and sisters because of their particular way of being community. The author of John's gospel was writing to a community that needed desperately to be reassured of their place in relationship to the sacred, in relationship with Jesus.

Oddly enough, the community that wishes to continue to be the church in the 21st century needs desperately to be reassured of our place in relationship to the sacred, needs desperately to be reassured of our relationship with Jesus.

So what are we to do? We need to *be* the church. We need to do what Mary did, and stay around long enough to encounter Jesus. We need to do what the disciples did, and gather often enough to share the peace of Christ with each other, and with others. We need to do what Thomas did, and get close enough to Jesus to touch his wounded hands and side. We need to do what the disciples did, and break bread together so that Jesus will be known to us, too. All these things are about being the church. About gathering together, about being present and ready for the presence of Christ. And they don't seem that difficult!

But if we don't gather, if we aren't patient outside the tomb, and we go home, we'll miss Jesus. If we don't gather, if we aren't together to pass the peace of Christ, or if we aren't close enough to Jesus to touch his hands and side, we'll miss him. If we don't break bread together, we'll miss him. And if we miss him, if we continue to try and be the church without gathering, what will we be?

In my home church, growing up, I remember interviewing a parishioner as part of my confirmation process. I had to ask a series of questions about their faith, their participation in the local church, and possibly, the wider

church. When I asked about attendance, they told me that during the nicer weather, they worshiped at the altar of the 18 links.

Since then, I've had parishioners tell me that they will often worship when camping, fishing, doing laundry, going to the beach, skiing, or hiking.

And these things can very much bring us closer to the sacred, and they very well may be enjoyable and even fulfilling. But they won't bring us to Jesus. To do that, we'll need to be together.

Here's an interesting thing: on the ancient maps, there is no place called Emmaus. In Hebrew, its meaning is something like 'deep longing'. So the disciples were on the road to 'deep longing', and were joined by Jesus, who was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Perhaps the answer to the steep decline in the health of our churches these days isn't in recreating the successes of the 1950's, '60's, and 70's, but instead lies in recreating the early communities that literally and symbolically feared for their very existence, and gathered together as much for protection and support as they did to worship.

Regular gathering for worship, for passing the peace, and for breaking bread together seems like a pretty good recipe for seeing Jesus.

A little over 15 years ago, I became acquainted with a middle-aged couple named Tim and Cheryl. Cheryl was a special education teacher nearing retirement, and Tim was a retired auto worker who also happened to be blind. I had been bitten by the cycling bug, I loved riding my bike, and often, my conversations with Tim revolved around cycling. He told me that as a teenager, at his school for the blind, he had been taught to ride a tandem bike. He knew how to keep his balance, even though he could not see. We cooked up a plan to find a used tandem bike so that we might ride together. When we told his wife Cheryl, she looked at me like I was crazy, and she said, 'Gary, are you *trying* to see Jesus?!!'

I suspect what she meant was that another way to see Jesus is to be near death, which makes a lot of sense to me, but that seems like an awfully dangerous way to see Jesus. It seems a lot safer to just gather regularly, pass the peace of Christ, and break bread together...

The Johannine community, the group of faithful that the author of John's gospel was trying to reach, didn't worry about how many members they had, they worried about the quality of their interactions with each other, and with Jesus.

We could take a page out of their playbook: if we became more concerned with the quality of our faith interactions, and worried less about how many people are in the pews on Sundays, we just might survive these difficult times.

Focusing on our ability to live into our hopes, live into our faith, as opposed to living out of our fears, might just bring us to our Lord and Savior. Using Mary and the disciples as a template for our own faith practices may open up new ways for us to see Jesus. I still would like to get Tim on a tandem bike, just to see if we could ride together, but that's just me. I've always been a bit of a risk taker...

We are an Easter People. At the very heart of our faith, at the very core of our understanding of our faith lies the process of death and resurrection. Jesus teaches us in his own way about the seed that must die and be buried before it can grow into a plant, our own seasons show us that after the death of winter, plants find new life in the spring. Over and over again, repeated cycle after cycle, there is death, and there is resurrection.

So why do we fear the coming death so much? When will we be able to accept that we won't experience new life, resurrection, for the church until the old church dies away? When will we trust that the cycle, the process, is both natural, and necessary?

Gathering in Christ's name to pass the peace, to worship God, and to break bread together puts an emphasis on our relationship with Jesus, and not on

our survival. These things help us to see how the church can be stronger in order to do the things Jesus calls us to do for and with our neighbors, and even our enemies. It can also show us how trying to meet our own needs through the church can get us on the wrong path. Ironically enough, our survival will be guaranteed if we could focus on being the church again, for the sake of others, and be worried less about the church that meets our own needs.

It's beginning to look like the church of the 21st century is more of a means to live out our faith than a way to serve ourselves. Like the disciples on the road to 'deep longing', the church of the future will be part of a journey, not a destination. When we try to make it a destination, we risk losing sight of Jesus.

On our own collective journeys of deep longing, if we are patient, if we can wait by the empty tomb long enough for Jesus to call us by name, if we can share the peace of Christ with each other, and with others, if we can be close enough to Jesus to touch his hands and side, if we can gather to intentionally break bread together, Jesus *will* be known to us, and we will be doing the work of the 21st century church. Let's get to it. Amen.