

Easter 3 – April 26, 2020 Cycle A

The “Walk to Emmaus” is obviously a resurrection story – a record of Jesus’ Easter appearance to two disciples. But it is far more than “just” that. While it’s important to know that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to many as proof of his resurrection and promise of life beyond the bounds of death, Luke’s account gives us more. The disciples in question were leaving Jerusalem, 3 days after Jesus had been crucified. They had surely heard Jesus say that “after 3 days he would rise again”. By their own admission they knew that “some of the women of their group” had reported Jesus’ tomb empty and had seen “a vision of angels who said that he was alive”, and yet they were still in despair and on their way out of town. They were puzzled about what they had heard, but unwilling to trust themselves to it. Luke tells us that despite their doubts and fear, Jesus came to them anyway – to get them back on the right path, the “Way” he had come to “trailblaze”. Yet, clouded by fear and doubt they were not able to see, to recognize Jesus, though he walked beside them and “opened” the scriptures about himself to them! Consider. Though Cleopas and the other disciple had lost faith and were on the wrong path, Jesus came to gather them back into the fold! This is immensely reassuring. As always, Jesus was true to his word. He had left the “99” and gone out to gather the “lost sheep”! But Luke is not finished yet, revealing reassuring truths to us.

After accompanying them “out” of Jerusalem and with light fading, Jesus is prepared to move on. Cleopas and the other disciple, however, urged him to stay – because “of the hour”, but also because while they failed to recognize Jesus, their hearts “burned” with hope as he spoke. Then as Jesus “took the bread, blessed and broke it” their eyes were opened and they saw Who it was that had been with them all the time! Luke tells us that later, they reported to the others that Jesus had revealed himself “in the breaking of the bread”. This teaches us that if we are lost and wondering where Jesus is, he can be found in the “breaking of the bread” – in a meal shared in the company of other believers who have gathered to remember him. Jesus said, “This is my body” – his solemn promise – and that gave himself for us (Luke 22:19)! The “Walk to Emmaus” reveals that all who gather in Jesus’ name, can know that he is with them “in the breaking of the bread”! This is both his promise and his command, “Do this in remembrance of me” (22:19). So in one short story we have reassurance that despite our doubts and fears, Jesus will come to find us and open our hearts to the truth; that if we ask him, Jesus will stay and reveal himself in our company! More specifically, we will discover that Jesus has been there all along; we just were too afraid and filled with doubts to recognize him!

2020 has been a year of doubts and fears. Death, we are reminded, is “out there” waiting to trap us and we are powerless against it. The coronavirus, however, is just death’s latest tool. COVID-19 is probably naturally occurring – not “invented” in a lab. But it was likely “isolated” in one. A virus is not a “malevolent” entity. Virus’ aren’t “alive” in a strict biological sense. They can’t think or make choices. COVID-19 is not “out to get” anyone. It’s simply doing what virus’ do – replicate when given the “right” environment. For most of its history that environment has been the living tissue of bats. Many suspect that human beings were inadvertently exposed to this bat virus in a laboratory, where it rapidly adapted itself to human lung tissue and replicated in abundance – first in one person, then another, and another, and another... Soon there was an epidemic; not the first in history, not the last. It’s terrible and tragic. Death has been set loose in abundance.

In the case of COVID-19 human sin gave death a big boost. Apparently, Chinese officials wanting to cover their errors – the failure of their governmental “system” and laboratories – attempted to hide what was happening. Medical scientists were silenced. Whole regions were locked down. Reports of a new, highly contagious and deadly disease were stifled. International agencies were lied to. Records were falsified. Travel restrictions were put in place too slowly – especially with respect to travel outside of China. International warnings were deliberately delayed... The plain truth: human sin, as it always does, gave death a big ‘helping hand’. Intentional or not, in the case of COVID-19 this has happened. The present estimated death toll is 198,000 people. No one outside the Chinese government knows the actual figure there. Therefore, the death toll is likely much higher. Thanks to the sacrifice of many ordinary Chinese citizens, word did get out “sooner” rather than later. These men and women saved many lives. Thanks to quick international efforts, the spread of COVID-19 has been slowed. Medical research holds out hope that a vaccine will be created in the coming months and years. Yet should this happen, death will not be stopped. It will merely continue in its “usual” forms, biding its time until another war or pathogen affords it the opportunity to “replicate”.

We live in a frightening and uncertain world – just as deadly as when Jesus came to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Accidents still happen. Though on average we live longer, people still grow old and die. War... We’ve raised war to an “art” beyond any Roman dream. Gun’s, bombs, tanks, ships, submarines, airplanes, missiles – death by “remote control” – no one in Jesus’ time could have imagined war today. Many people are “out on the roads” fleeing one place or another in doubt and fear. Human sin is the reason. We are envious of others. We want what others have or are afraid of what others might try to take from us. We look away and try not to think about the places where people are starving, in poverty, and dying from disease. This was the case 2000 years ago, and it is still the case today. Why? Not simply sin, but because too few gather to remember Jesus – not merely to attend church, but to live as he taught, to love as he did. Now as then, death is having a “field day”.

Where can hope be found? One place is Luke’s account of the “Walk to Emmaus”. There we learn that despite our failings, Jesus is willing to come to our rescue, gather us up, and encourage us to rejoin our neighbors in celebration of God’s victory over death! Is this not Good News? Should we not be ecstatic with joyous celebration? We should! God has not abandoned us to hopeless death. Instead, God sent Jesus Christ into the world! Despite rejection and betrayal, God again offers us forgiveness and life! This is the message of Easter, the reason we can have hope. Sin and death are still in the world, as virulent as ever. But so is God! Jesus is here with us even now: in our homes, in our lives, in our churches, and especially when we gather to “break bread in remembrance” of him!

Today, under self-quarantine, we can only gather and break bread in small groups – 2 or 3 or even 1. This is not new. The first believers, in fear of their lives, had to worship in secret! Yet Jesus was with them. Though we are not able to gather in person, God’s Spirit is with us nonetheless. Therefore, we are never alone, but constantly in the presence of all the saints – past, present, and future! This is God’s doing; something Jesus promised! Therefore, take heart and remember Jesus whenever you break bread in his name. For he is with you! Amen