

Third Weekend of Easter (RCL/A)

1 Peter 1:17-23

Luke 24:13-35

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I have never felt more like a stranger than walking into a pub in a tiny town called Fionnphort on the western coast of the Isle of Mull, one of the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. This past December after Kristiane flew home, Pastor Mark & I were staying in a local Air B'nB, and wanted restaurant fare instead of the microwaved pizza we'd been having in our little cottage. We knew there was only one eating establishment open in town, since December is **not** the tourist season in that far-flung corner of the world, so we got there extra early, 4:30 or 5 p.m. It was already dark and cold outside, so we were happy to step into the warmth and light of the pub. As we entered the buzz of conversation immediately hushed and everyone turned to stare at us. I smiled (a little uncomfortably, I'm sure) and walked over to the fairly crowded bar to request a table. The young woman I spoke to looked like a deer in the headlights and turned silently, almost pleadingly toward the older man standing next to her. He told us there were no tables available: the whole place was closed and booked for the local school's PTA Christmas dinner. Alrighty then....

Out we went again into the cold, rainy night. We drove 15 minutes east down the unlit, winding, single track road to the next little town, Bunessan, a name that may ring a bell for you because it's the tune for "Morning Has Broken." We enjoyed a nice dinner there, in a lovely room with a blazing fire, and discussed how bizarre it had been to be received in the other place like aliens from another world. The young woman behind the bar had seemed almost fearful of us.... We felt very much like strangers.

There's a Stranger with a capital S in our Gospel today. As the Lord walks along the road to Emmaus, He catches up with two disciples who do not recognize Him. We're only given the name of one: Cleopas. Some say that this could be the same person as Clopas, as in "Mary, the wife of Clopas" who according to the Fourth Gospel stood beneath the cross with the mother of our Lord and Mary Magdalene (John 19:25). If this is the case, the second unnamed disciple could be Mary the wife of Clopas.

The Lord asks, “*What’s this you’re discussing so intently as you walk along?*” (Luke 24:17, *The Message*). Cleopas answers (a bit sassily), “*Are you the only **stranger** in Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have taken place there in these days?*” (Luke 24:18b) Obviously the Lord knew more than they did, but He wisely invites them to tell **their** story, including the sad confession, “*We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*” “*...[W]e had our hopes up that he was the One....*” (Luke 24:21, NRSV and *The Message*) They were so very, very disappointed that they were very, very honest about their hopes being dashed. They didn’t care about making themselves vulnerable to accusations they’d been naive for believing in a “Messiah” who ended up as a has-been.

There’s a lot of disappointment going around. In talking with the parents and grandparents of our children and youth, and with some of the kids themselves, they’re sad and frustrated about a boatload of postponements and outright cancellations: class trips, proms, awards dinners, graduations, First Holy Communion, Confirmations.... From our perspective, these disappointments pale in comparison to the inability to visit a sick loved one in the hospital, to gather *en masse* for a baptism, a wedding, a funeral,. But we can also look back to how crushed **we** felt in our childhood and adolescence by the things others considered small, and our hearts go out to them. Our prayer is that in **all** their disappointments, our children and youth trust that Christ walks with them on the Way.

We need that reminder, too. Jesus was faithful-as-could-be to weekly worship during His lifetime, but the stories we have about His post-resurrection appearances aren’t set in the synagogue or in the temple. Our risen Lord meets His friends in a locked room where they’re cowering in fear. He walks another Via Dolorosa, a second sorrowful way, from Jerusalem to Emmaus with two disappointed followers who feel like they’ve been gut punched, physically and spiritually. Then He chooses to reveal Himself to them not on a mountaintop but at a dinner table. The risen Lord will greet a boatload of disciples from the shore very early another morning, and cook breakfast for them on the beach. He meets us where we’re at, in the midst of **whatever** we’re feeling, including the low tide lulls of faith, hope and love, the high tide surges of fear, disappointment, anger, anxiety.

The risen Lord pauses His journey and stops to have dinner with these two road companions because they ask Him to – actually, ***“They urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us....’***” (Luke 24:29a-b) The practical reason they give is, *“because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.”* (Luke 24:29) Traveling after dark was a dicey proposition in those days, and safe lodging was not easy to find. By inviting Jesus to stay, Cleopas and his companion are offering holy hospitality to the Stranger.

But we can guess they weren’t just being kind, they were also grateful to have a third party to their conversation, especially one who offered hope through Scripture and gave comfort by His caring, calming presence. Our Hymn of the Day is “Stay with Us” (*With One Voice*, #743). It includes these verses, which may be the real reason the disciples from Emmaus *“urged [this Stranger] strongly”* to stay on:

Walk with us, our spirits sigh: hear when our weary spirits cry,
feel again, our loss, our pain: Jesus take us to your side.

Walk with us, the road will bend: make all our weeping, wailing end.
Wipe our tears, forgive our fears: Jesus, lift the heavy cross.

Once the risen Lord breaks His cover in the breaking of the bread, He vanishes. Poof. Off He goes to places unknown. Someone has said, **“Perhaps the only way to keep him is to go with him!”**¹ So let’s take time this week to reflect on two things:

1) The Lord is most apt to grace us with His hope-engendering, comforting presence when we **urge Him strongly** to do so, issuing Him a heartfelt invitation, welcoming Him longingly, joyfully into our hearts and homes, as you are doing by worshiping today. Remember that picture of the Christ, standing outside a cottage door with no outer latch? It has to be unlocked from the inside. The Lord will not overwhelm our free will by forcing Himself upon us. In Revelation the risen Lord specifically says:

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to your and eat with you, and you with me.” (Revelation 3:20)

2) We are most apt to find the Lord and to stay in His company as we offer holy hospitality to the stranger among us. The Bible leaves no doubt that the Lord loves the stranger, keeps company with the stranger and commands us as well to love, accompany and care for the stranger:

Don't abuse or take advantage of strangers; you, remember, were once strangers in Egypt. (Exodus 22:21, The Message)

You must treat foreigners with... loving care. (Deuteronomy 10:19, The Message)

"Whenever you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

Do not neglect to offer hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:1)

Our Lord has many identities, but one that this Gospel discloses is that He is the Stranger who teaches us to welcome the stranger. This story also lets us know that "the only way to keep Him is to go with Him" into the hurting places of the heart and of the world, to make His saving presence known.

Amen

¹*Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), p. 426.

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