

Easter 3 - Year A
6 April 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Luke 24:13-35

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

We call (the Holy Scriptures) the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible.

Even if I didn't believe those words of the catechism in our Book of Common Prayer, even if I hadn't declared at my ordination that I believe the Holy Scriptures to "contain all things necessary to salvation," I would still love the Gospel of Luke.

If the Gospel of Luke were only an interesting piece of literature to me, well, it would still be a very good piece of literature. The writer of this gospel was a skilled story teller, someone who knew how to weave themes and events and characters into a beautiful, beautiful story.

The story of the visit of an angel named Gabriel to a young woman named Mary; the account of the Nativity with a manger in a stable, a bright star in the sky, shepherds on the hillside, and angels singing; the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Those are found only in Luke's Gospel, and what would our Christian story be without these stories?

And, then there is today's gospel reading – the story of the appearance of the Risen Jesus to two perplexed and confused believers walking on the road to Emmaus. It is a story rich in detail and beautifully written. Even if we only saw this story as literature it would still be beautiful, wouldn't it?

But, for those of us who gather here this morning, it is something more than just good, even beautiful, literature, isn't it?

This story appears in none of the other Gospels, and it is one of our most beloved Christian stories. In this story, as with the rest of scripture, God desires to speak to us.

Two believers, walking from Jerusalem to a little town called Emmaus, on the evening of the Resurrection. First, only three days before, they had been witnesses to the crucifixion of Jesus – this one they considered “a prophet mighty in deed and word.” This one they had followed, tortured and executed by the Roman authorities on a cross.

And, now there was the account given by Mary Magdalene and some other women that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb. Unbelievably, these women had also reported that angels had told them Jesus was no longer dead but alive.

Perplexed and confused, indeed, as they walked along. Talking, trying to figure out what in the world was going on, when out of nowhere a stranger joined them as they were walking. The stranger, who seemed to be totally unaware of what had happened in Jerusalem over the past three days, listened as these two - Cleopas and the other - related all that had been going on.

Then, after hearing what they had to say, this stranger seemed at least a little put out with their confusion, calling them foolish and “slow of heart.” Then, he proceeded to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures about the Messiah to them, explaining the events they had witnessed in Jerusalem in the last three days.

After this brief scripture lesson, Cleopas and the other invited this stranger to stay and eat, and the three then had dinner together. At the dinner table, unexpectedly, this stranger who had started out as the guest, the one invited to dinner, became the host – taking the loaf of bread, breaking it, blessing it, and giving it to them to eat.

It was at that moment – when this stranger took the bread and broke it - that the two believers were able to identify who this stranger actually was – it was Jesus, the Risen Christ! But, at the amazing moment of recognition, suddenly Jesus was gone.

Quite a story, isn't it?

For many commentators, the interpretation of this story revolves around word and sacraments.

How was the Risen Jesus revealed to those believers on the road to Emmaus? Through breaking open the word of God found in the scriptures and through breaking the bread at table.

How is the Risen Jesus revealed to us 21st century believers? Through the scriptures and through the Eucharist.

Now, I believe that this interpretation is correct. But, I think that Luke may also be telling us something more about Jesus, the Risen Christ, and where we can find him, how he is revealed to us in our day and in our place.

One of the great themes of Luke's Gospel is hospitality – typically involving the sharing of food in table fellowship. I think the idea of hospitality may help us grasp fully what Luke is telling us in this story set on the road to Emmaus.

For some of us, no doubt, hospitality may mean something like getting the house clean, maybe getting some fresh flowers, and putting out a good spread when our friends come over to dinner. But, the dictionary clarifies things a bit.

Dictionaries define “hospitality” as

“kindness in welcoming guests or strangers,”

“the quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers
in a warm, friendly, generous way,”

“reception and entertainment of strangers or guests without reward,
or with kind and generous liberality.”

For the dictionary, hospitality involves the way we welcome, the way we treat, guests and strangers, those who aren’t our friends.

Hospitality was a central value in ancient Israel and it was referred to in several places in the Hebrew Bible – notably in Abraham’s hospitality to “three strangers,” described in the 18th Chapter of Genesis. A responsibility to care for travelers and strangers was something that a people who remembered their history of wilderness wandering would clearly hold dear.

From the beginning of Luke’s Gospel in Mary’s Magnificat – My soul magnifies the Lord - to its end with the Emmaus story and the story that comes right after this one, the story of the risen Jesus eating a dinner of broiled fish with his disciples, Luke tells us that God feeds his hungry creation through Jesus.

Through Jesus, the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty-handed. Through Jesus eating with sinners and outcasts, we see God's desire for full restoration of union with humanity, as imaged in the Messianic banquet.

Through Jesus' admonition to invite those who cannot repay – the poor, the blind, the disabled - when giving a dinner party, we see the true definition of hospitality. Through Jesus' gift of food in the desert, the hungry multitude in the wilderness was well fed - even with leftovers.

Luke tells us about a Jesus who just seemed to love to extend and to receive hospitality. Luke's Gospel is literally full of stories about food and Jesus sitting down to eat with people.

In two of these stories, Jesus served as the host: in the story of feeding the five thousand and in the story of the supper on the night before his crucifixion. In both of these stories, but especially at that final supper with his disciples, Luke connected Jesus as host explicitly to the coming of God's kingdom.

Jesus, who continued to his dying breath to provide the food of life to his disciples, promised his disciples that he would share food again with them when God's Kingdom comes in its completeness.

In the story of the believers on the road to Emmaus, Luke beautifully interwove the themes of hospitality and the kingdom and gave us a word picture of the meaning of the risen Jesus for all of humankind, including those of us who are believers in the 21st century.

When Luke described Jesus acting as host and offering food – bread – to the two he had met on the road to Emmaus, he was telling us that God's Kingdom has come, that Jesus has overcome

the power of death, that God would not allow death to be the final word, and that now Jesus holds in his hands the power of life – symbolized by food.

God's Kingdom hasn't come through a violent overthrow of the enemies of God and God's people. No, the Kingdom comes with the powerful weapons of meals shared even with sinners and outcasts, table fellowship that breaks down the barriers that separate people from one another. Jesus death on the cross may have looked like defeat, but it was victory.

Now, on that "road trip" to Emmaus, Jesus ate with disciples who had abandoned him on his journey to the cross, forgiving them and empowering them to come back and to resume the journey with him.

The disciples were fed and continued on Jesus' Way only after they had offered to show hospitality to a stranger, a stranger who turned out to be the Risen Jesus. Their sadness over the death of Jesus, their confusion over the events of the last three days, all gone as they welcomed a stranger, as they replaced their own crippling self-concern with hospitality.

Hospitality is something that I've seen many times since coming to St. Anne's Church.

A group of people spending time on a Sunday afternoon to worship with folks whose bodies and memories are failing them, sharing Valentines made by our children and brightening the faces of those who gave them and those who received them more than you can imagine;

young people and adults sharing food and other necessities with those who for one reason or another have needs that they cannot fill on their own, sharing a smile and kind words, carrying bags of items to cars, and treating those they serve with dignity, respect, and love;

greeters welcoming newcomers to our parish, others talking with these newcomers during our fellowship time, and still others making sure there is food and drink to share;

receiving an e-mail request on our “prayer chain” to pray for people we may not know and may never even see.

Even the hospitality of cutting down the height of the altar and raising the level behind the pulpit for a new rector who is just a little bit shorter than the average priest.

Hospitality – it sounds like such a wonderful thing, doesn’t it? But, we must always remember that showing hospitality can be risky. It won’t always make us popular or universally loved, any more than it made Jesus popular or universally loved in his day. Hospitality can sometimes mean eating with sinners and outcasts – with those who are not always accepted or respected by those in power. It may even mean sharing with our enemies or those we fear.

Hospitality – at its root it is the entertainment of divine mystery in human life, especially when that life seems scattered and shattered. Every Sunday, we see a re-enactment of the hospitality of the Risen Jesus, as we break the word of God together in the scriptures and as we gather at Christ’s table together, where there is always enough to eat and where there is a place for all of us and for each of us. God still feeds his hungry creation through Jesus.

The early Christian communities seemed to have it right as they placed a great stress on the value of hospitality. The Letter to the Hebrews said,

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

As we, in our own time and place, show hospitality to guests and strangers, I believe we may even find ourselves entertaining the Risen Christ himself!

Allelulia. Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Allelulia.