

Call to Worship

The women go out to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning. There they see an empty tomb. They do not yet believe, but they obey the angel's command and return and tell the disciples, "He has risen!"

For us as well, Easter is something that we understand, not through arguments or reasoned discourse, but through believing, seeing, obeying, and following the risen Christ.

The fog is lifting. Our vision is returning. We see clearly what before we saw dimly.

God is turning back the hands of time. Death is conquered and will be no more. Jesus is risen, and we too are raised with Jesus!

The Word

Luke 24:13-35

On that same day, two disciples were traveling to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking to each other about everything that had happened. **While they were discussing these things, Jesus himself arrived and joined them on their journey. They were prevented from recognizing him.**

He said to them, "What are you talking about as you walk along?" They stopped, their faces downcast. The one named Cleopas replied, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who is unaware of the things that have taken place there over the last few days?" He said to them, "What things?" **They said to him, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth. Because of his powerful deeds and words, he was recognized by God and all the people as a prophet. But our chief priests and our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel. All these things happened three days ago. But there's more: Some women from our group have left us stunned. They went to the tomb early this morning and didn't find his body. They came to us saying that they had even seen a vision of angels who told them he is alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women said. They didn't see him."**

Then Jesus said to them, "You foolish people! Your dull minds keep you from believing all that the prophets talked about. Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then he interpreted for them the things written about himself in all the scriptures, starting with Moses and going through all the Prophets. **When they came to Emmaus, he acted as if he was going on ahead. But they urged him, saying, "Stay with us. It's nearly evening, and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. After he took his seat at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?"**

They got up right then and returned to Jerusalem. They found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying to each other, "The Lord really has risen! He appeared to Simon!" Then the two disciples described what had happened along the road and how Jesus was made known to them as he broke the bread.

Living the Word

Several years ago as I was returning from a winter vacation down south, I was waiting in the Minneapolis Airport baggage claim area for my luggage when I noticed a pastor friend coming down the escalator. It surprised me with so many people around the airport that we might meet there. World travelers frequently share the same common experience. It may happen while they stroll through some international airport in Hong Kong or while bargaining with a street vendor in Senegal - a 'chance encounter' with someone whom they know, perhaps someone from their hometown or maybe even a close friend...

I wonder how often we have a 'chance encounter' with the Lord. How many times has Jesus stood right next to us, but we didn't recognize him. How many times has 'something' told us to do a particular thing, but we have failed to recognize that 'something' as the voice of God? If there is anything that we should learn from Jesus' earthy ministry, it is that he makes intentional encounters with people. As followers of Christ, we must live as Christians who seek the risen Savior intentionally and not by chance.

In Luke 24:13-35, two of Jesus' followers, Cleopas and one that isn't named, are traveling toward Emmaus, a walk of about 7 miles from Jerusalem. Along the way they have a 'chance encounter' with the risen Lord Jesus. The sun was setting as the day was waning, much like their hopes for the future. Jesus was the last one they expected to meet. One commentator calls the 'half-disciples' as their faith was only a half belief in the risen Christ, even though they were familiar with the scriptures; even though they had encountered and knew of Jesus as a powerful prophet of God; and even though they had heard the witness of the women about the tomb being empty. At this point their faith had been traumatized by the whole ordeal.

They were in a deep review of the past day's events, discussing all that had happened. Now, I am a processor, so I know how this goes. I need to bounce thoughts and ideas off of other minds to understand if they make sense. When we share thoughts we can come to new understandings; when we depend on only our own thoughts, we can only move forward in our own direction, passing everyone else by as we go.

Processing, trying to understand it all. Deep in thought and words, these travelers didn't recognize Jesus when he joined them. When Jesus asked them what they were discussing, their list of broken hopes poured out to him. Cleopas answered incredulously, *"Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who is unaware of the things that have taken place there over the last few days?"* And then it began to pour out. Cleopas had to bring this stranger up to speed, sharing the news, informing of the pain and disappointment he was feeling. *"We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel."* Time had come for Jesus to speak, as their faith was falling apart right in front of him.

When Cleopas' flow of words slowed down and ended, Jesus must have been very frustrated to know that everything seemed to be unraveling. He spoke difficult words to the travelers. I wonder if they were spoken harshly: *"You foolish people! Your dull minds keep you from believing all that the prophets talked about. Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"* Or were they spoken from the painful place where Jesus was coming from? *"You foolish people! Your dull minds keep you from believing all that the prophets talked about. Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"*

This was not the first time that Jesus had to confront an 'almost faith' in one of his disciples. During his years of ministry, Jesus often found people who toyed with trust in him, letting it lead them sometimes, but ignoring it other times. They had waited for generations for the Messiah, yet very few of them truly believed that he was the one, at least long enough to call their faith a solid faith. Peter was a key example.

Do you remember when Peter believed long enough to get out of the boat to walk on water and a step or two later was sinking into the sea. For a couple of seconds, he did actually walk on water! But Peter's fear as he once again heard the wind and lost focus on Christ which brought him to floundering.

Actually Peter deserved some credit for stepping out of the boat. None of the other disciples did. He had almost believed he could do it. Almost is a frustrating word. When was the last time you were in a hurry to arrive somewhere, but had to wait for someone else to be ready or for a train to pass or three stop lights to change? They are almost ready to go, but not soon enough and you become almost on time.

I wonder if that is how Jesus felt as Peter began to sink? Once he pulled Peter to safety in the boat, he didn't say "Good try!" or "Better luck next time." Instead Jesus chastised Peter saying *"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"* Jesus was not impressed that Peter 'almost believed.' Jesus wanted Peter to move completely away from doubt and rest fully in the hands of faith. Just think what would have happened in Peter's mind and

heart if he had continued to walk on the water to Christ...Possibly Jesus more than reprimanding Peter, was grieving the loss of what could have been.

The Emmaus travelers' fixation with the facts of the last few days, kept them from enjoying a full fellowship of their unknown companion, who was the Lord. Many of us aren't any different. We are so anxious to enter into debates about who God is and what God is capable of doing that we fail to experience God. Endless spiritual debates, of which we may never know the answers to in this lifetime, may give us a headache, but lead us no closer to God. God is mysterious and has many things we cannot understand in this world.

Finally the travelers recognized their walking/talking companion as the risen Savior and they said "*Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?*" As Jesus had walked with them he had reopened the scriptures to them. Have you ever had the experience of a piece of scripture, a hymn or a Christian idea coming back to you in a different place than where you first found it and had the epiphany moment as you see it in play before you?

I have had my friend Jan on my mind for awhile as April is her birthday month. On her birth-day I was too busy to concentrate on my calendar long enough to realize it was the day. The next morning, with my mind on today's scripture, I remembered Jan and thought about how she had traveled the road with me as I began my discernment process to become a pastor, as I began seminary classes and as I received my first church appointment.

We had many discussions about religion, our doubts, our beliefs and our hopes. As I reflected this week on those times together, I realized we had journeyed together, with Christ always in our midst. We both had grown up in the church, though different denominations. We both had had good and not-so-good experiences with pastors. She helped me see Christ in conversations about women clergy, what a call to ministry looks like and how some people who claimed to be Christian didn't seem to be very Christ-like.

Honestly we never thought we had all of the answers and as I attended more and more seminary classes, we realized we had very few answers. Yet in the midst of all of it, as we walked with Christ, our faith grew stronger. Something happens to us spiritually when we actively search for Christ in the scriptures, in worship and in prayer.

I initially planned to do a Holy Thursday Service, to celebrate the bond of the disciples with Christ, bringing it forward to the bonds we experience here in fellowship as we serve and learn together. We are a welcoming church because we genuinely love each other and want others to have that same experience. In the midst of our worshipping community there is a communion, which has traveled from the Upper Room of 2000 years ago to once a month at Hayward United Methodist remembering Christ as center of our relationships.

Then, instead, we were invited to host the Good Friday service – not a warm and fuzzy, with Christ's death and the betrayals of his closest comrades. Yet, as I gathered clergy willing to participate and seven agreed, I realized that those clergy and a couple that could not participate all really wanted to share in worship, together with us. In that service, my heart was warmed, that we could come together and share what we have in common across our different beliefs, a part of the Holy Week journey, the part where Christ died for us.

Traveling with the risen Christ takes place during times of personal camaraderie and communion with others. Jesus stopped by the home of the two travelers and shared a meal with them. All throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus regularly broke bread with others as a continual invitation to fellowship with him. He ate with sinners, though the Pharisees claimed them to be unclean. In the Upper Room he shared Passover Seder, even though he knew they were in the presence of a betrayer.

Now, as Jesus sat to eat with these two 'half disciples,' their eyes were opened and they recognized him. The Lord prepares not only a table for us to gather at during Holy Communion, but sits within our presence

whenever we gather. This is where we can encounter Christ, as we open ourselves to opportunities of being with others in Christ's name.

The late, renowned theologian Henri Nouwen learned to encounter Christ in a unique community. Though he had taught in Ivy League universities around the United States and in other institutions around the world, Nouwen chose to share the final years of his life with persons in Toronto, Canada, who were developmentally disabled. There he learned how tremendous levels of love, intimacy and fellowship could be shared in community.

Through a simple nod of the head or an earnest attempt to smile, God's love permeated the hearts of the workers and the community's residents. Henri discovered that he didn't need to concentrate on 'doing' a lot for this community; instead he concentrated on 'being' what they needed – a living witness of Christ's love.

It becomes a full circle: as we look back over the journey of life, we see that traveling with the risen Savior happens when we accept Christ's invitation to follow him. As we take the risk of serving God with the gifts we have been given to share, we are walking with the risen Savior. As we face our deepest fears, we walk with the risen Savior. As we allow God's love to flow through us to our enemies, we walk with the risen Savior.

When we speak honestly and authentically with God in our prayers, saying what we really mean and meaning what we say, we walk with the risen Savior. When we feel betrayed, yet find the strength to forgive others, we walk with the risen Savior. When we spend time in the scriptures and we know that there is something there for us in the people and the stories and we want to know more, we walk with the risen Savior.

Throughout the year, we see the Cross of Jesus hanging in many places: in churches, on necklaces, or on walls in our homes. Today we celebrate that the cross we see is empty...Christ has risen. Yet, these crosses remind us that everything we do happens in plain view of the cross. Like the disciples traveling to Emmaus we may not always recognize Christ's presence; but the Lord is always there, ready to offer his love, and his forgiveness, and his courage all through our lives.

We don't have to wait for 'chance encounters' with Jesus. We can look and find our Savior in every corner and closet of our lives. Learn to get comfortable with Christ as your constant companion. Recognize him in the faces of others. Hear him in the sounds of the weeping in your soul. Feel his joy in your heart as you share yourself with others.

Doubt is the enemy of faith. When you doubt, ask Jesus where he is...and hear him say, "I am with you always 'til the end of time."