

April 23, 2023
The Third Sunday of Easter
Luke 24:13-35
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

It was a few years ago, one of the First Communion classes before the pandemic, and I was expecting it to be a small one. Two kids, tops.

But I did what I always do leading up to our First Communion classes. I got the word out about it in our newsletters and announcements and on our website. I reached out to a lot of people, parents of kids that we hadn't seen in a while, grandparents, even some of my personal friends, to let them know that we were putting our First Communion class together. And, probably most importantly, I prayed.

And all of a sudden, kids came out of the woodwork. There were the two kids that I was expecting and then there were all of the others. A cousin of one of the kids who I was expecting in the First Communion class came along for the experience. One of my own kid's close friends joined the class. A brother and sister that I had never met joined in. One of the parents that I had reached out to had her daughter join the class.

The First Communion class that I was expecting to be two kids quadrupled to eight. Eight kids, some of whom I had never met before, some who had grown up at Emmanuel, and some who had never been to church regularly at all in their lives, all showed up to get ready to receive First Communion.

And we had some amazing discussions because, for some of them, it was the first time that they had ever heard some of the Bible stories that we were talking about in First Communion class.

I think that sometimes when we've gone to church for a long time, we stop hearing the miracles in the Bible stories. Manna came up from the ground and fed hungry people for forty years. Of course it did.

Or sometimes we get hyper critical of miracles, trying to apply our adult, rational, scientific minds to them. Maybe we start to question, to doubt. Sometimes we try to make them symbolic.

Sometimes, we might even get jealous of the miracle stories in the Bible, wondering why things that happened then, way back thousands of years ago, don't seem to happen now, at least not in the way the Bible describes, at least not as often, at least not to us.

But none of that happened with the kids who gathered for First Communion that year. Instead, those kids heard the Bible stories that we learned about that year, with a sense of wonder; with joy, with surprise, with hope.

They heard about manna and quail in the wilderness and were impressed with God's generosity. They heard about Jesus' last supper with his disciples, and as we acted it out, passing a plate and a cup from person to person, I could see them embrace the gravity of the moment, imagining that they were there, hearing Jesus say, "Take, eat, this is my body. Take, drink, this is my blood."

And then we got to this story, to the story about the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

The disciples, Cleopas and the unnamed disciple, were walking away from Jerusalem on the day after the Sabbath, after Jesus had been crucified and buried.

It seems likely that Emmaus was their home, that they were people who had joined Jesus sometime during his journey to Jerusalem, maybe shortly before he entered the city, hoping, believing, as Cleopas tells the stranger who joins them on the road, that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel. But it had all gone wrong.

As Cleopas also told the stranger, Jesus had been handed over to the Romans to be condemned and crucified.

It seems that Cleopas and the other disciple had stayed in the city long enough on that terrible Friday to learn what had happened to Jesus.

And then it was the sabbath day and they were stuck in the Jerusalem.

Maybe they spent the sabbath with Jesus' eleven remaining disciples and with the women who had journeyed with him, and who had seen him crucified and had seen where he had been buried, and with other followers of Jesus who had joined him as he traveled or joined him in the city.

Maybe they had heard the eleven disciples making plans to go back to Galilee, as soon as their day of enforced rest was over.

Maybe they had heard the women make their plans to go to the tomb on Sunday morning to anoint Jesus body before they left the city.

The next day, when the Sabbath was over, so, Sunday, it was time to start moving again, through their grief, through their shock, through their disappointment. Time to go back to normal life, as normal as life could be again for people who had hoped and who had had that hope disappointed.

We didn't read the Easter morning story from the gospel of Luke this year, so let me remind you what happened on Easter day morning, according to the gospel of Luke.

The women got up early on Easter day, when dawn was just breaking, and took the spices that they had prepared for Jesus' burial. Maybe they had been up all night, getting things ready and just waiting for there to be enough light for them to make their way out of the city and to the place where Jesus was buried.

But, of course, when they got to the tomb, they found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to Jesus' tomb. And when they went in, they found that his body was gone.

And then, while they were standing there, the text tells us, "perplexed," suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The text tells us later that the men were angels. And the two angels, told the women the story of the resurrection.

First, they asked the women a surprising question, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (Luke 24:5a)

Then they told them, “He is not here, but has risen.” (Luke 24:5b)

After the women received the two angels’ message, they ran back to the disciples to tell them what they had seen and heard.

But guess what happened. The men, the eleven apostles and Jesus’ other followers, heard the women’s story and, this is a direct quote, “these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11). The men didn’t believe the women’s story about Jesus’ resurrection.

Cleopas tells us as much in today’s gospel reading. He’s a little bit more tactful than Luke was when he told the Easter story. Maybe it was to save face with the stranger.

What Cleopas told the stranger was, “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” (Luke 24:22-23).

But there he and the other disciple were, on the road, heading out of Jerusalem, apparently believing as the other disciples did, that the women’s story was an idle tale, that there was nothing more to see in Jerusalem, that it was time to get back to get to ordinary life, time to head home, time to get back to normal, that their time of miracles, and hope was over, dead and buried.

Then the stranger 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?” (Luke 24:25-27).

So, Cleopas and his companion kept walking with the stranger and he told them stories from scripture, that should have helped them to know that the women’s story had not been an idle tale, that Jesus had been raised from the dead. But still, they didn’t get it.

When I was telling this story to the kids in that First Communion class, I stopped the story there and asked them if they had any questions about the story.

One of the kids raised her hand and said, “I wonder why they didn’t know that the stranger was Jesus. Why couldn’t they recognize him?”

Most of the kids in that room hadn’t heard this story before. They didn’t know what was going to happen. They were completely mesmerized by the story.

But before we got to the ending, we talked a little bit about what might have been going on. They shared their guesses about why the disciples couldn’t recognize Jesus.

Maybe Jesus didn’t want them to be able to recognize him, so maybe God made it impossible for them to see Jesus.

Maybe they were so sad that they couldn’t see Jesus.

Maybe the sun was in their eyes; a very practical thought.

Maybe Jesus looked and sounded different after his resurrection than he had before his resurrection.

Maybe the idea of someone being raised from the dead was so strange to them that they just couldn’t see it, even when it was right in front of them.

Those were all good guesses, and since I don’t really know the answer, so, it was time to get back to the story. The kids really wanted to know what happened.

Of course, you know what happened. I just read it to you.

The disciples and the stranger arrived in Emmaus as the sun was setting. And when Cleopas and the other disciple got to their house, they stopped the stranger from going on and invited him to stay with them; for dinner, for the night. It was getting dark and night was not a good time to travel.

The stranger accepted their invitation, and when they came to the table for dinner, the stranger took the bread, and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them and when he did that, all of a sudden, their eyes were opened and they could see Jesus. And at that moment he vanished.

The two disciples 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?” (Luke 24:32).

So, they got up from their table and went the whole seven miles back to Jerusalem, night or not, and found that the disciples were no longer talking about an idle tale. They had changed their tune and were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon” (Luke 24:34).

Imagine how much the kids loved it when the disciples’ eyes were opened, when they could finally see Jesus, when they finally knew it was him. They were so relieved.

And then I told them this great good news, that they would see and touch and taste Jesus when they took holy communion, and that Jesus meets us in so many ways, in our daily lives, around our tables, in strangers on the roads, in opportunities to be generous, in times when we experience the generosity of others.

And those kids, those kids, some of whom had maybe never thought much about Jesus at all, believed what I said, because they had heard this story the miracle of the stranger on the road and the breaking of the bread with wide-eyed wonder.

They believed that Jesus would meet them in communion, and on their roads, and at their tables, and in their lives.

And we talked about keeping our eyes open, and about being ready to be surprised by Jesus.

Have you ever watched a movie that you love so many times that you stop being able to see it or hear it. You know it so well that it becomes background noise, even if you turn it on, intending to watch it; it’s hard to pay attention to it because it’s so familiar.

I think that sometimes, we can get that way with the stories of our faith. We’ve heard them so many times before, that we just stop hearing them.

Maybe it's because of some disappointment, that we, like Cleopas and his friend, don't want to take the risk of hoping, as we drag our feet through our ordinary lives, that Jesus can meet us, that Jesus can surprise us, that miracles can happen, that life can be called forth, even out of death.

Maybe we don't want to seem naïve, maybe we don't want to be disappointed again.

Maybe we're just not really listening. Maybe we're just not really looking, not really looking for Jesus.

Maybe we started looking at the scripture stories as comfort food for our souls and not as life changing good news.

I think that it happens, I think that at one time or another all of those things have happened to me.

But those first communion kids that year, hearing this and so many other stories for the first time reminded me to hear these stories with wonder. To feel the joy of Cleopas and the other disciple. To expect Jesus to show up in unexpected places. To keep my eyes open. To let myself think that the great good news of God's love might break into my life in such a way that it would make me run seven miles in the dark to tell the folks I had left behind that I had seen the Lord.

There is so much loss, so much death all around us, that maybe it's hard to believe. But Jesus met Cleopas and the other disciple on the road and was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. And the tomb was empty, Mary and the other women saw it. And Jesus appeared to Peter and Thomas and the other disciples. And Jesus feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Jesus who was crucified, brings life and hope into the world.

So, with those first disciples I say, "Alleluia, Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!"