**Third Sunday of Easter**

**Sunday April 26, 2020**

**“Encountering Jesus” (Luke 24:13-35)**

There are many wonderful stories in the Bible that have the power to capture our imagination, to transport us to a different time and a different place, to enable us to have a dynamic encounter with the living God. For me, Peter’s speedy swim back to shore to meet the risen Jesus in John 21 is one of those stories, but this tale of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is equally meaningful. In both instances, the risen Christ came to people amidst their fear, sadness, guilt, dismay, and confusion and set things right through his loving presence. These stories are extremely encouraging for us because our Lord still works in this way as he comes to us amidst the messiness of life and comforts us. But like those disciples, there may be times that we’re unable to recognize his reassuring presence on the road of life.

 Luke 24:13-35 tells the story of two disciples who were travelling from Jerusalem to their home village of Emmaus on that first Easter Sunday. The eleven-kilometer journey would have taken about 6 to 8 hours to complete, so the had lots of time to talk and reflect about the tragic events of those past few days. They had just lost their best friend to a horrific set of events. Jesus, their beloved teacher and friend had been crucified and buried. As they took that weary trip home, they poured over the details of that awful Friday and wondered how such a terrible thing could have happened to such a good person.

 While they were sharing their sad tale, an unexpected traveller joined them on the road. The risen Christ walked alongside them “*but their eyes were kept from recognizing him*” (Luke 24:16). On a number of occasions in the resurrection stories in the Gospels the disciples did not recognize the risen Jesus (Matthew 28:17; John 20:14; 21:4). In this case it appears that God was keeping these two disciples from recognizing Jesus until their eyes were opened at the climax of the passage (Luke 24:31). God had a plan for a meaningful unveiling of Jesus’ identity.

 The risen Christ asked them, “*What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?*” (Luke 24:17). Now, I find this question really interesting. Jesus likely knew exactly what they had been talking about, yet he still asked them about their conversation. Their response to Jesus’ question exposed their deep despair. “They stopped short, sadness written across their faces” (Luke 24:17). Their emotions were plain to see. Their sadness, despair, disappointment and confusion could not be hidden. Surprised by their fellow traveller’s ignorance about current events, Cleopas, one of the travellers, responded, “*Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?*” (Luke 24:18). He couldn’t understand how a recent visitor to Jerusalem would not have known about the tragic events of the past few days. But Jesus pressed on with his inquiry, “*What things have happened?*” (Luke 24:19).

 I imagine that Cleopas told his story with great emotion, his voice quivering; maybe he even shed some tears. He shared about his friend, Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet, mighty in word and deed before God and all the people, yet one who had been arrested, sentenced to death, crucified, and buried (Luke 24:19-20). The deep sadness of the Emmaus Road disciples was due to the fact that they couldn’t understand why this mighty person of God was rejected and crucified. They had great hopes for Jesus. They hoped that he was the longed for Messiah who would liberate Israel and end their exile (Luke 24:21). But, those hopes were shattered. Their sad tale had a perplexing postscript. Earlier that morning, just as the two disciples were getting ready for their trip home, reports were circulating that Jesus’ tomb was empty and his body was missing. The women who visited the tomb spoke of visions of angels and heavenly declarations that Jesus had come back to life (Luke 24:22-24). But the disciples had trouble believing the women’s story because it seemed like nonsense to them (Luke 24:11).

 As I reflect on this Gospel story I think that it was very meaningful that Jesus invited these disciples to share their story with him. All that heavy stuff needed to get out. The risen Jesus asked and listened to their story. And he listens to all of our stories. He invites us to be honest with him, and with one another, about what is going on in our lives. My prayer for all of us is that the risen Christ would give us courage, honesty and trust to share our questions, doubts, and burdens with God and with each other. Jesus listened to their story, but he didn’t leave them wallowing in their grief and confusion. In the same way, Jesus enters into the messiness of our lives and intently listens to our stories filled with pain, frustration, anger, disappointment, and heartache. And he responds to us in the same way as he did on the road to Emmaus. He is present to us in the *open word* and the *broken bread.*

 Jesus got right to the heart of the disciples’ despair and gave them scriptural insight into the traumatic events of the past days. While he rebuked them for their lack of understanding (Luke 24:25), he moved on to revolve this by opening up the Scriptures to them. In the heart of this story, Jesus declared, “*Was it not necessary that the Messiahshould suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*” (Luke 24:26). While the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday filled these disciples with great sadness and confusion, Jesus demonstrated that they were not random, unfortunate, or unplanned events. God had planned it all and the Holy Scriptures were a witness to this fact. Jesus opened up the Scriptures and pointed out everything that referred to him. He revealed to these disciples how the Scriptures taught that it was *necessary* for the Messiah to suffer and then to enter his glory.

 At the story’s climax, when the two disciples finally recognize Jesus, they immediately recall this key moment in their walk with Jesus - “*Were not our hearts* *burning* *within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*” (Luke 24:32). In the same way, Jesus desires to open the Scriptures to us and reveal so much to us. He longs to give us insight, guidance, encouragement and help and to transform our broken hearts into burning hearts.

 But it begins with allowing the risen Jesus to open the Scriptures to us. It requires us to move beyond merely reading Scripture and listen to God’s voice. Eugene Peterson wrote, “*Reading Scripture is not the same as listening to God*. To do one is not necessarily to do the other. But they are often assumed to be the same thing. This happens so commonly and so insidiously that we have to be analytically alert to the ways in which listening to the word of God slides off into reading about the word of God, and then energetically recover a listening ear. *The Christian’s interest in Scripture has always been in hearing God speak, not in analyzing moral memos*” (*Working the Angles,* p. 61). Listening to God may require us to read Scripture quite differently. Instead of gobbling up huge helpings of Scripture, we’ll have to slow down and digest smaller portions of the Word. Instead of seeking to fill our minds with information, we’ll need to read the Bible in order to be transformed by the voice of God. Our approach Scripture must have the intention of meeting the risen Christ and hearing his voice. Our desire is to have Jesus open the Word to us like he did with the Emmaus disciples. One way to start this new way of Bible reading is to begin with a brief prayer of openness to God, inviting Jesus to speak to you through the Word.

 But there is another way to encounter the risen Christ – *in the breaking of the bread.* As Jesus and the two disciple neared Emmaus, they offered him a place to stay because the sun was going down (Luke 24:28-29). They urged him have supper and stay the night in their home. As they sat down for the evening meal, their mysterious guest took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them (Luke 24:30). In that moment their eyes were opened and they recognized him (Luke 24:31). They knew that the risen Jesus was in their midst. Later on, they would recall to the others “*how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread*” (Luke 24:35).

 This scene should remind us of the Last Supper, the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before his death. On that night he took bread, blessed, broke it and said, “This is my body, which in given for you.” He then took a cup of wine, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20). This special meal became an essential part of the early church (Acts 2:46; 20:7, 11; 27:35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26) and it continues to be an important element of Christian worship. While Christians use different terms to describe the meal, such as the Lord’s Supper, Communion or the Eucharist, all agree that it is filled with mystery and meaning.

 While Christians celebrate this meal in different ways and have different theological beliefs about it, we can all agree that *Christ is make known to us in the breaking of the bread*. The famous Protestant Reformer, John Calvin describes the Lord’s Supper as “a spiritual mystery, which cannot be seen by the eye, nor comprehended by the human understanding, yet in the bread and the wine we may say that Jesus Christ is there offered to us that we may possess Him” (Calvin, *A Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*). Presently, we cannot meet together to share the Lord’s Supper. But a time will come when we can share this special meal together once again. My prayer for all of us is that our eyes will be opened to recognize our Lord in the breaking of the bread.

 In the midst of our fear, sorrow, distress, confusion, and stress, Jesus comes to us. He comes to minister to us through the Word and the Table. Let us be eager, then, to meet our Lord and receive his gracious gift of life.