

April 23, 2023
Luke 24:13-35

Easter 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“A Joy-Filled Homecoming”

“Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

“Make our ways safe and our homecomings joyful...” – ELW Responsive Prayer. Homecomings are usually joyful occasions, especially when we have been away from home for an extended period of time. Coming home means returning to the place where we know we are loved, where we know we belong, where we know that we are missed when we are absent and warmly welcomed when we return. No matter where it may be located, coming home is a moment of joy and celebration. But not all homecomings are joyful. When we come home when a family member has died, we are not only surrounded by the sadness of that loss but also the reminders of the person who is gone from our sight; all the items we shared are still in place, but the one we loved is missing. Coming home after suffering a loss or failure elsewhere can also be a less-than-joyful moment; we are returning home because we have struck out in other life endeavors. It can also be difficult to come home to a family that is divided or dysfunctional, to a place that brings back traumatic memories that time cannot easily erase. Even if our journey is safe, all homecomings are not joyful.

In today’s Gospel lesson, two travelers are returning home to Emmaus after an extended time away in Jerusalem. After his account of the women finding the empty tomb and the announcement by the angelic figure that *“he is not here, but has risen”* (Luke 24:5), and after Peter runs to the tomb and discovers *“the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened”* (24:12), Luke reports that two travelers *“were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem”* (24:13). These two travelers were probably among the extended group of Jesus’ followers who were with him in Jerusalem (*“But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things”* – 23:49). As they are walking along this well-traveled road, returning home to Emmaus, Luke reports that they were *“talking with each other about all these things that had happened.”* (24:14). They are so engrossed in their conversation that they barely notice that another traveler has joined them; the Evangelist reports that *“while they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from*

recognizing him” (24:15-16); this inability to recognize another person is used frequently in Luke and is balanced by later accounts in which a person is given the ability to recognize what was once hidden from them (“... *so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*” – 1:4). Unlike the resurrection stories in Matthew and John in which Jesus appears to the women after his resurrection, this is the first time our risen Lord appears in Luke, in a story that is unique to this Gospel. Jesus initiates the conversation, asking his fellow travelers “*what are you discussing with each other as you walk along?*” (24:17). This question stops them in their tracks, and they “*stood still, looking sad.*” Then one of the disciples named Cleopas responds with amazement, asking the traveler he still does not recognize “*are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place in these days?*” (24:18). The irony, of course, is that Jesus is the only one who does know the meaning of all that has happened over the past three days, but he feigns ignorance when he responds, “*What things?*” In classical irony, the ignorance of the “know it all” character (*alazon*) is exposed by the character who pretends to be ignorant (*eironeia*). Luke makes use of this classical trope when he puts Jesus in the role of the ignorant person pretending that he needs to learn from the disciples who do not even recognize their Lord on the road to Emmaus.

The two disciples (the second one remains unnamed) respond by summarizing the events that have transpired and reveal that they do not understand what has happened:

- “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel.” – 24:19-21a.

They had hoped that Jesus would fulfill the Scriptures in being the Messiah who would “redeem Israel,” but they saw his death – which was indeed the fulfillment of his mission as the Messiah of God – as only the frustration of their hope, the reason why they have left Jerusalem and making this joyless trip toward home. The disciples then go on to report that “*it is now the third day since all these things took place*” (24:21b). In Jewish tradition, it was believed that the soul hovered over the body for three days, after which the death was confirmed (“*Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days*” – John 11:39). The know-it-all disciples again betray their ignorance because they fail to recognize the three days as a sign of the fulfillment of Jesus’ passion predictions in Luke:

- “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” – 9:22.
- “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles, and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” – 18:31-33.
- “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” – 24:7.

The disciples go on to report that the failure to see the risen Lord had created confusion regarding the meaning of the empty tomb, that the women who had discovered the tomb *“came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him”* (24:23-24). Again there is irony in their words: *“the two were confused because Peter had not seen Jesus, but now they have seen the risen Lord and still they do not understand”* (Alan Culpepper).

After they have finished their account to their fellow traveler who they assume is ignorant of what has taken place in Jerusalem, Jesus takes control of the conversation and assumes the role of a teacher, beginning the process of revealing himself and the meaning of the resurrection to these disciples. The revelation of the Easter reality begins with the fulfillment of the Scriptures, and those who fail to see it are like these disciples: *“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!”* (24:25). The suffering of the Messiah was necessary in God’s providential plan for the redemption of Israel and the salvation of sinners. It was necessary for Jesus to go to Jerusalem (*“Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem”* – 13:33), and there to suffer and die (*“But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation”* – 17:25). It was necessary that the Scriptures be fulfilled in Jesus (*“For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.”* – 22:37, Isaiah 53:12). The fulfillment consisted not only in Jesus’ suffering, but also in his entering into his glory: *“Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”* (24:26). The summary continues with the emphasis on the importance of the fulfillment of Scripture in all that has happened: *“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”* (24:27). The

Christological interpretation of the Old Testament that would be practiced by the early church is authorized by the risen Christ himself; “*Christ is the fulfillment to which all Scripture points.*” (Culpepper).

The meal scene when the travelers arrive in Emmaus is an *anagnorisis*, a recognition scene in classical literature in which the identity of a previously unknown person is revealed. When the travelers “*came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on*” (24:28), but the disciples urge Jesus to “*stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over*” (24:29; Judges 19:9). As Jesus had earlier received hospitality from Zacchaeus in Jericho (“*Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today*” – 19:5), so Jesus now accepts hospitality from his fellow travelers, a key aspect of ancient societies in which hospitality to strangers was the mark of a respectable person and often necessary for survival in this harsh environment (“*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*” – Hebrews 13:2). The scene at Emmaus is reminiscent of the experience of Abraham and Sarah at Mamre, where they offer hospitality to persons who they at first do not recognize but who are revealed as “*the LORD [who] appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day*” and who reveal to Abraham that “*I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son*” (Genesis 18:1, 10).

When the disciples sit down at their family table with their still-unknown guest, Jesus takes on the role of the host when “*he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them*” (24:30). While this would have been a common aspect of any meal, Luke’s readers will recognize elements of the Last Supper and Jesus’ establishment of Holy Communion with his disciples (“*Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’*” (22:19). It is at this moment that “*their eyes were opened, and they recognized him*” (24:31). Immediately after the disciples recognize Jesus, he vanishes from their sight, an experience that looks back to Gideon’s encounter with an angel of the Lord as well as forward to Jesus’ ascension into heaven:

- “The angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire sprang from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight.” – Judges 6:21.
- “When he has said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” – Acts 1:9.

The disciples now realize who was traveling with them and the significance of this encounter with the risen Lord: *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”* (24:32). They now realize that *“the living Christ is both the key to our understanding the Scriptures and the very present Lord who is revealed to us in the breaking of bread ... In remembrance we experience recognition, realization, and understanding.”* (Fred Craddock).

If the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus was marked by joylessness and disappointment, the disciples’ return trip from Emmaus to Jerusalem was the exact opposite; as soon as they realize what they have experienced, *“that same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.”* (24:33). Before they can share their encounter with the risen Lord, the other disciples proclaim the good news of Easter, that *“the Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!”* (24:34). While there is no mention of the risen Lord’s appearance to Simon Peter in Luke, both John and Paul report of encounters between this disciple and Jesus following the resurrection:

- “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’” – John 21:15.
- “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” – 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

Only after they hear of the appearance of the risen Lord to Peter do the two disciples get their chance to share their experience of what had happened to them: *“Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread”* (24:35). The return to Jerusalem *“joins the experience of these two disciples to that of Simon Peter and the eleven in the company of the others.”* (Craddock). Having experienced the joy of Easter in the presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, all these disciples will now become the one who through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit will be sent out to share this good news and resurrection and life with all people:

- “The early disciples had little ritual but a mighty realization. They went out now remembering Christ, but experiencing him. He was not a mere fair and

beautiful story to remember with gratitude – he was a living, redemptive, actual place then and there. They went out with the joyous and grateful cry, ‘Christ lives in me!’ The Jesus of history had become the Jesus of experience.” – E. Stanley Jones.

The disciples’ journey to Emmaus had at first been a joyless homecoming; for them, *“Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life.”* (Frederick Buechner). But when their eyes were opened and they realized that the person who was traveling with them was none other than the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, their sad journey home – to which they returned because they had no where else to go – was suddenly transformed into a homecoming filled with blazing joy, because they realized that wherever they may be from that point on – in Emmaus, in Jerusalem, or wherever else their apostolic journeys may have taken them – they were always at home because of Jesus’ promise that *“I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20) and our assurance that nothing can *“separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:39). Because Christ is risen from the dead and abides with us always, we know that all of our homecomings can be filled with joy because no matter where we are, we are at home with our Lord and Saviour who is *“our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.”* (ELW Hymn 632).

- “In other words, it is precisely at such times as these that Jesus is apt to come, into the very midst of life at its most real and inescapable. Not in a blaze of unearthly light, not in the midst of a sermon, not in the throes of some kind of religious daydream, but at supper time, or walking along the road ... He never approached from on high, but always in the midst, in the midst of people, in the midst of real life and the questions that real life asks.” – Buechner.

Not all of our homecomings may be moment of unbridled celebration; but even at moments of sorrow or distress, we can be filled with joy because we know that no matter where we may dwell, we are always filled with joy because Christ is with us and makes his home with us, a home where we are welcomed, a home where we are loved, a home where we belong and will dwell with our risen Lord forever.

Amen.