

Third Sunday of Easter, 23 April 2023
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
James Knutsen

[3 Easter A: Acts 2:14,36-41; Psalm 116:1-3;10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35]

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

I wish the Gospel reading today continued one more verse:

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."¹

That's generally taken as the beginning of the next story in Luke's resurrection narrative, which we will hear next year on this Third Sunday of Easter, but it seems to me that it's also the real conclusion of today's story: "Peace be with you."

So, when we say, "Peace be with you," we are quoting the risen Christ, quoting the words he speaks to his fearful, confused, traumatized friends and disciples: "Peace be with you."

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How he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

This reading, this time, takes me back 40 years or so, when I was a confused, and more fearful-and-traumatized-than-I-then-realized, first year student at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I had felt some significant degree of clarity that I wanted to seek ordination in the church since my senior year of high school, and here I was in seminary immediately after college, at 22 years old.

But it didn't take long in this new milieu for me to feel that something wasn't right. It was just suddenly clear to me that there was no way that I was three years away from being ready to be an official representative of the institutional church. All the same, I deeply craved the theological education that was available to me there. I had a lot to unpack.

Ten years before, age 12, I attended a vacation Bible school for junior highers, held at my home parish, Trinity, Sonoma, and it blew open my experience of Jesus, of God.

I wanted more.

Some of the staff at the VBS were born-again, pentecostal "Jesus People", and soon I was hanging out with these guys and their Jesus People friends, and I had a very powerful "born again" experience at the beginning of 7th grade. It was exhilarating, and exciting to be involved with these mostly young adults who took such an interest in me. But some of that interest was not altogether healthy, and when I was 14 and 15, I was sexually abused by the man who was my primary mentor in the group.

My attachment to the fellowship and intense Jesus-centered religious experience of that group was so strong that I absolutely shoved the confusing experience out of my awareness, meanwhile absorbing a rather narrow, fear-based fundamentalist theology.

Since going to university I had distanced myself significantly from that group of folks and that kind of Christianity, and found a new sense of belonging in the more sacramental approach of the Episcopal Church. But in that first year of seminary I had only begun to speak, to just a very few people, of the

¹ Luke 24:36

abuse I had experienced; it would be years before I even began to get real help and to scratch the surface of coming to terms with that trauma. And though I knew that I wasn't a fundamentalist anymore, I struggled with what—and *how*—I believed.

Since senior year in high school I'd been riding that sense of clarity about ordination, but now suddenly I wasn't sure what *that* meant, either. So, unclear about what I believed, or what I wanted to do, but desperately wanting the theological education, I switched from the pre-ordination Master of Divinity program to a more strictly academic MA program. (I would eventually complete an M.Div. eight years later).

I was also really getting into the Grateful Dead, and skipped part of orientation at EDS for shows in Portland, Maine, and the Boston Garden.

That was in the fall. Then, in the winter semester, I attended a program in the seminary chapel, a musical presentation by a fellow student, called something like "A Christian Response to Nuclear War." That night, after the concert, I was profoundly unsettled, and awake for hours. I realized that I did *not* believe that God was going to intervene and prevent us from destroying ourselves and the planet in a nuclear conflagration. And *that*, at the time, seemed contrary to what I believed about the Christian God. How could God let that happen?

Suddenly, I wasn't so sure I believed in God, wasn't so sure I was a Christian. I continued the theological studies, and found them very interesting and helpful, but pretty much stopped going to church. In fact, for a two year period, while in Divinity School, I was more frequently to be found at Grateful Dead shows, up and down the East and West Coasts, than in church. As I remember saying to a fellow student at the time, the Dead provided ecstatic experiences while never claiming to be anything they weren't. The church? I wasn't so sure.

But occasionally, for one reason or another, I'd find myself in church, either in the seminary chapel, or attending a parish church with a friend. And it was

the eucharist. And at some point in the liturgy I'd realize: Oh... duh! *Communion*. What am I going to do? What *should* I do?

It was an uncomfortable dilemma. As best as I can recall, I would kind of decide that the more honest thing would be not to receive, since I was pretty sure I didn't believe in the Christian God.

But then it would happen. The Eucharistic Prayer. "Take, eat: this is my Body, given for you..."

In that moment, my heart would somehow open and I knew that my deepest sense of myself, of who I was, was in knowing and being known by this person, this presence, this Jesus, giving himself for me. Suddenly, receiving the bread and the cup seemed the most honest, truthful thing I could do, and I did so, every time.

I can't remember exactly, but I think that this happened at least two or three times, each time as if for the first time. Slow of heart, I would forget. And then, finding myself at Eucharist again, my heart would speak.

And I guess I began to remember.

Did not our hearts burn within us on the road?

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, I eventually recognized that Jesus had been walking with me all along.

How shall I repay the LORD for all the good things he has done for me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the LORD.

What about you? What has been your experience of the breaking of bread, of the Presence that draws us here again and again? What happens in you at the breaking of the bread?

I think we are all, always, on the road to Emmaus. Note that these two disciples are essentially running away, trying to get away from the pain, trauma, and confusion, going down the road, feeling bad. Even when we're running away, Christ walks with us,

asks us what is happening with us, enters into deep conversation with us, listens.

And, if *we* can listen, he will slowly show us who he is, and who we are, and how he has been present all along. Not just interpreting the scriptures to us, but interpreting *with* us our *own* stories, our own losses and traumas, showing us that all our stories are already deeply etched in his heart, in the heart of God. And showing us how to seek and serve him in one another, too, walking with one another as he does with us, listening and interpreting with one another our own journeys, sorrows, joys, and pain.

And Jesus: taking, blessing, breaking, giving: opening our eyes, kindling our hearts.

Where are you in the story now? In pain and confusion, running away? Discussing and arguing with yourself or a friend about what it all means? Perhaps a sense that someone is walking with you, interested in you and your story?

Perhaps someone has shown up for you and been Jesus for you on your walk, listening to your story and shedding new light on it?

Are you discovering, perhaps, that your story and Christ's story are one, that he has always been with you and that your story too will reveal the goodness, the love, the glory of God?

Or is it that moment of recognition, the breaking of the bread, your eyes opened and your heart burning with the presence that has been with you all along?

Is it the moment when, into your fear and confusion, he speaks: "Peace be with you"?

I'm still on the road to Emmaus. I've experienced the recognition in the breaking of bread, my own heart burning; I've heard the gentle "Peace be with you"; but I still struggle with my own story, my own trauma, discerning God's presence with me in all that, seeking to understand and know more fully who God really is, and to let go and grow into who I am.

The walk, the talk, the telling and retelling the story, the opening of the scriptures, it all continues. I identify with every part of the story at once.

You?

As one of our poets has said,

*Once in a while you can get shown the light
In the strangest of places if you look at it right.²*

Each of us has a different journey, entirely unique, and yet we journey together, because Christ journeys with us, and enables us to journey together, accompanying one another with him and in him, empowering us to "love one another deeply from the heart."

The journey can be long and complicated, at times very lonely, and sometimes we do our part in making it longer and more complicated and perhaps more lonely and painful than it needs to be—and certainly we can do that to one another.

I know of no easy, quick, way to make it all better, simpler, easier. But I give thanks that for me Jesus has become the way, the truth, the life; he is with us on the journey, and is our journey's end, the only possible ultimate destination: he who takes the bread, blesses, breaks, and gives it, and in giving it gives himself, who gives us the sign of his presence in our own burning hearts, and whose greeting to us is ever and always, "Peace be with you."

*How shall I repay the LORD for all the good things
he has done for me? I will lift up the cup of
salvation and call upon the Name of the LORD.*

²² Robert Hunter, "Scarlet Begonias" (music by Jerry Garcia).