

Third Sunday of Easter • April 26, 2020ⁱ

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Luke 24:13-35

“Jesus Abides”

These disciples have had a tough week. Chances are they numbered among the crowd who followed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, cheering “Hosanna!” They were hoping that he was the one who was about to redeem, to rescue, God’s people Israel. And a couple of days later, Jesus cleared the vendors and moneychangers out of the temple, causing a huge stir. It seemed like everything was coming together; something big was about to happen. But then it all went sideways. The temple guard came and arrested Jesus as one of his closest friends handed him over to the religious leaders. They put him through a sham trial and demanded his execution through the Roman governor. On Friday that week, the disciple’s hope for rescue was brutally beaten and then shamefully hung on a cross to die. And he did. A few of Jesus’ other followers claimed his corpse and hastily buried him before the end of the day. But this morning, the third day since Jesus had died and was buried, some of the women they knew had gone to the tomb but found it open and empty, returning to report the astounding news that Jesus was alive! That’s a tough week.

Today, on Sunday, they’re leaving Jerusalem behind. We don’t know much at all about Cleopas and the other disciple who journeyed with him that Easter afternoon. But we do know that something extraordinary happened to them as they head toward Emmaus, about two hours’ walk away. This guy comes up to them as they’re discussing everything that happened this past week and starts to go alongside them. That’s not unusual. What amazes them is that he then asks, “What’s all this that you’re talking about?”

Imagine the scene. They stop walking, standing still in disbelief. The disciples supposed that this man was a fellow visitor to Jerusalem, kind of like they were. The word that they use is *paroikeo* (παροικέω), describing how someone might dwell in a place as a stranger, a temporary resident, a sojourner. How could this man – how could *anyone* – who’d spent time in Jerusalem this past week not know what had happened? The two disciples probably have to take a beat, staring at their new companion with confused looks on their faces. They’re like, “Don’t you get it, stranger?” They don’t understand what’s going on. But thanks to St. Luke, we do.

The kingdom of God had drawn near to them. This stranger, this sojourner, is the risen Jesus. Their eyes are kept from recognizing Jesus for who he is. These disciples had known that Jesus was someone important, saying and doing amazing things. But they still need someone to open their eyes to the truth of just who this Jesus of Nazareth really is. So Jesus himself comes to them and gives them the best Bible study ever.

I really appreciate how Jesus starts his teaching as they set back out towards Emmaus, reflecting their amazement back at them: “Don’t *you* get it, disciples?” These two disciples don’t know the rest of Jesus’ story, despite what they’d heard that morning before leaving Jerusalem. Like the religious leaders who wanted their beloved teacher out of the picture, they had failed to recognize that all the Scriptures pointed to Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the rescuer. That he had to suffer and die to bring about the rescue that all people needed. So for the rest of their trip, Jesus lays it all out for them. Jesus, himself the Word Made Flesh, proclaims the word to these shaken disciples so that they might have faith. The kingdom of God has drawn near to them, and he wants them to be part of it. That’s the goal of Christ’s teaching: that people might recognize him for who he is, that they might experience the rescue he’s won for them.

As they arrive at Emmaus, Luke tells us that Jesus looks like he’s going to keep moving along, as if he’s got somewhere else to be. But these disciples who have been amazed by his teaching now urge him to abide, to stay present with them. And he does. And this is where we get to the truly awesome part of this episode. As if a two-hour masterclass on the Old Testament led by the risen Lord himself isn’t enough, Jesus sits down to have a meal with these ordinary disciples. Jesus, who was their guest, becomes their host. He takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, doing what he did before at the feeding of the five thousand and again at the Last Supper. As he gives them the bread, **their eyes are made to be open**. They recognize Jesus. They understand who their travelling companion really is. He’s no longer a stranger. And he disappears from their sight. Now that have experienced the fullness of Jesus’ presence with them, they don’t need to see him with their eyes any longer.

Jesus abides, even though he goes. Cleopas sort of had it right: Jesus was a temporary resident whose sojourn in Jerusalem – and on this earth – was ending. And as we see in the other Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances, he had other places to go, to be with his people, before his ascension into heaven. But Jesus isn't going to leave his people high and dry. The Emmaus disciples have been made part of the kingdom of heaven through their resurrected Lord. Their lives are now forever changed, and they have something to share with the world.

Ever since the days of the early Church, Christians have celebrated the Lord's Supper and experienced the gift of table fellowship with our risen Lord. At his table, Christ Jesus is the invisible but present host who, though his word, has pointed us to who he really is: our rescuer. Even when our world is shaken, he abides with us to give us strength. In Holy Communion, Jesus calls us to look ahead to the heavenly feast when we will get to see him with our own eyes. The current health crisis has kept us from celebrating the Lord's Supper in large groups, but we're thankful that we may to continue offering it here at St. John's by appointment. And while there might only be a few people receiving Christ's body and blood at the same time in our sanctuary, we still experience the table fellowship that Jesus makes possible: we are united with fellow Christians across space and time as our risen Lord connects us with eternity. That will never change.

What happens with those disciples in Emmaus? After their encounter with the risen Lord, they can't but help go and share the good news. They head right back to Jerusalem on Easter evening. But they are not returning as they left earlier that day, shaken and uncomprehending; now, they are confident believers with understanding. They make it back to hear the report that the Lord had appeared there, too. And then the two new arrivals get to share the news of their time with Jesus, how he'd opened up the Scriptures to them and how they finally were made to recognize him in the breaking of the bread. God had opened their eyes, so now they'll get to share what they'd learned from the Lord with the rest of his disciples.

Jesus may have been a sojourner on earth, with a set time on earth, but he abides with his people. Even today. Jesus is here with us as we gather in his name. We recognize our risen Lord in his word, which guides, corrects, and strengthens us. He's present with us in his Supper, giving us his body and blood as medicine for body and soul. He's with us in his Church, of which he alone is the head. So we follow Jesus, joining him on his mission wherever he will lead. Like the Emmaus disciples, we don't need to see the Lord with our eyes to know that he lives. The rescuer is here to connect us into the kingdom of God. So let's go with them and share this good news for all people: Jesus abides.

Amen.

ⁱ Passage for memory:

For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. – Acts 2:39