

Third Sunday of Easter Year A (26 April 2020)

Luke:24:13-35



Today, on the third Sunday of Easter we hear/read one of my favourite narratives in the Bible - Luke's well known, and well-loved story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus. It's the story of two ordinary people, people like you and me, on a journey, it's the story of new life breaking into the midst of shattered hopes.

On the evening of that "same day" – Easter Day, when Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, and the other women discover the empty tomb and Peter confirms their news, we meet two of Jesus' disciples on the road from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus.

The two—one is named Cleopas, we're told—are discussing all that has happened: how Jesus had taught and healed; how that same Jesus was betrayed, flogged, and made a spectacle of shame; and how that same Jesus had breathed his last and was laid in a sealed tomb.

As far as the disciples were concerned Jesus was dead and had left them alone in the world to fend for themselves. They were utterly dismayed. They were certainly not prepared to see him alive.

Yet as they were on their journey, and discussing all the things that had happened, Jesus himself came near and went with them. But the one they

encountered was not the flesh and blood Jesus, a resuscitated version of the man they knew, but the Jesus of God, one knowable only by the mystery of divine self-revelation.

The resurrected, but unrecognized, Jesus discussed with them the things that were burning in their hearts. He listened to their hopes and dreams for a messiah. Easily, the most poignant line in their recitation is, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." We had hoped...

It's a statement saturated with honesty and pain—a confession of sorts. Nothing hurts quite so much as shattered hopes. Nothing is quite so painful as a beautiful dream of something long-desired that ends suddenly and is unfulfilled. Nothing is quite so bitter as the acrid taste of stark reality that a dying dream leaves behind.

After Jesus explains the scriptures he shares a meal with them and it isn't until Jesus takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them that they know who he is. These actions, this bread—they've seen this before. They remember. But no sooner do they recognize Him than He vanishes; He's gone again.

The story of the disciples encounter with Jesus along the Emmaus road is a story of hiddenness and revelation, of knowing and unknowing, of fleeting possession and eternal presence.

2000 years on not much has changed. Like the two disciples of old we too are left to ponder and reflect upon the same curious going on; unknowing encounters with God along the road, God made present as blessed and broken bread and our desire to keep hold of a God who vanishes.

At some point in our lives, we have all been on the road to Emmaus. We've all faced times when God didn't do what we thought that He was going to do – or for that matter what we thought He should do! It's the road we walked on when dreams and expectations went unmet and when hopes were shattered.

It's the road we walked when relationships broke down, when faced with financial hardship or ill health, and when a loved one died.

It's the road we found ourselves on when all the ways we used to feel close to God just didn't work any longer. That's the Emmaus road. I wonder if that sounds familiar.

The good news is that along the road of loneliness and despair, in the middle of those turmoils we were and are not alone. God walked and walks with us. The one who joined us along the way, the one who heard our disappointment and our heartache was still an Emmaus God, a God who encountered us along the road.

Have we always recognised Him? Perhaps not. But that does not mean that He was not there.

In today's gospel Cleopas and his friend walked with Jesus for miles but it wasn't until Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them that they knew who it was. These actions, this bread—they'd seen this before. They remembered. It's only looking back that they know. Oh, the signs were there all along—Jesus explained the scriptures to them, their hearts burned within them—but only looking back do they put it all together.

Some Emmaus journey's seem to last ever - it only took me 40 years to know and put mine all together! When I left the convent in 1981 I knew the pain of a long-desired dream that ended suddenly, of hopes shattered, the absence of a God I thought I knew. It was an incredibly difficult road to walk but once on that road, all I could do was keep going. It was a time of knowing and unknowing, an experience I would refer to as a "hanging on by my fingernails" It was only as I wrote a life reflection for my Clinical Pastoral Education(CPE) training as an ordinand that I was able to put a name to this experience – my Emmaus journey. After all the years and looking back I was finally able to see Jesus' presence along the way – my eyes were finally opened. There is indeed hope for us all!

The gift of faith is recognizing God's presence and having that recognition shape and guide our lives. In today's story we are told that the things that made Jesus recognizable to the disciples were the things that had always been true about who he was. The opening of scripture, the breaking of bread, the hospitality shown to the stranger.

And I have to think: maybe this is how Jesus always shows up. Even today. In the midst of our ordinary lives when we are walking towards home or getting ready for supper. In the faces of neighbours or strangers we meet along the way. When we read the Bible and discuss it together like in our reflection group. When we share a meal. When we invite someone to join us in fellowship.

After all, Easter doesn't happen one Sunday and then disappear. No, resurrection is something that happens every day. In relationships that break and then are mended. In hopes that seem to shatter and then are slowly reborn. In lives that fall apart but get put back together piece by piece.

If we want to experience Jesus—if we want to celebrate Easter—we don't need to position ourselves in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. No, we simply need to pay attention. For the risen Lord is among us. Moving and speaking and working here and now.

And even when we find it hard to recognize him. Even when we realize we have gotten it all wrong and missed the whole point, Jesus keeps walking beside us, meeting us on whatever road we are on.

He asks us what we are thinking about, and then begins to retell our story back to us with a whole new ending. He sets our hearts on fire within us with a hope that we thought we had lost forever. And all of a sudden we realize: Jesus has been with us all along. Amen.

Christ has risen alleluia alleluia!