

Church Signs

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Text: Luke 24

I greatly admire my colleague Rev. Jill Russell. And in addition to her many gifts, one thing I appreciate about her is her patience and good humor with me, particularly following my sabbatical this past Fall. You see, as some of you know, on my sabbatical I focused on reading a contemporary theologian James Alison – and so now what often happens is that I’ll be talking with Jill and I’ll say ‘Alison writes about that!’ or ‘Alison’s theology talks about that’. It’s kind of obnoxious – and Jill is very gracious about it – and fortunately she also likes Alison’s theology.

Well, now it’s your turn. Because what I want to tell you about this story today from Luke 24 is, ‘James Alison has something to say about this!’ In fact this passage is one of the core texts for Alison about being a follower of Christ. And so I simply want to acknowledge that what you’re hearing in this sermon is my processing of Alison’s commentary on this – not to blame him for this sermon, but hopefully to share some things that I think bring us into this story in meaningful ways.

And it helps to start in just that way, I think, of being brought into the story - because Luke presents this event as a church story. And what I mean by that is that this road to Emmaus event is told as an identity story of what it is to be the church. I know that Pentecost in a few weeks is marked as the birth date of the church, but I think this story actually cuts in front as a kind of founding church story. Because the

core issue being addressed here is found right there in the story: ‘2 are walking to Emmaus talking about all that had happened – Jesus drew near and joins them- but their eyes were kept from recognizing him’ – and that’s the issue: ‘how to recognize Jesus?’. The church is the community that witnesses to the presence of the Risen Christ among us – well, how does that happen? And we need first to realize that when it says ‘their eyes were kept from recognizing him’, that’s not some sort of magic trick Jesus is playing on these 2 folks – it’s not some sort of sleight of hand God uses for dramatic effect. No, it’s just that it turns out that recognizing the Risen Jesus takes a certain kind of seeing, and that’s the story Luke wants to tell.

So I simply want to notice with you two kinds of, ways of, seeing that are given in this story. The first has to do with scripture. This Emmaus story first focuses its drama on how the 2 on the road to Emmaus describe to Jesus all of the events about Jesus, and then Jesus comments on all of those events to these 2 by interpreting scripture to them (there’s a kind of wink and smile throughout the story as Jesus hears about and interprets about himself). We’re told that ‘beginning with Moses and all the prophets’ Jesus interprets the meaning of the Messiah.

And hearing that I’ve sometimes thought: ‘wow! - wouldn’t it be great if we had notes on what Jesus said? that would be amazing!- the only Bible study we’d ever need!’ But I’m afraid that such thinking of mine really misses the point. Because what this story is saying is: we don’t need the notes, we have the interpreter! What happened as those 2 travelers heard Jesus give meaning to scripture is what continues to happen for the church: we have scripture make sense and come to life as we view it through Christ -through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. So that means that we are not people of the word – of this book, the Bible - which may

sound strange to say at first! - but what this story grounds us in is that scripture has no life in and of itself, but only as we hear it through the Spirit of the Risen Christ. The Spirit of Christ opens up ancient words to speak contemporary truth, and the Spirit keeps us from using scripture as some kind of handbook of gatekeeping and privilege rather than a gift of creation and life. We are not people of the word, we are a people of the Living Word, the Risen Christ – and it is as the God of life moves among us that we see and hear God’s word speaking challenge and truth, love and grace, calling and courage to our lives. Those 2 travelers later say ‘our hearts were burning within us as he was opening scripture to us’ – isn’t that cool?! Scripture isn’t alive – Christ is alive! –it is through him that the word opens and comes alive among us, witnessing to the God of life at work in and around us - our hearts burning with hope and vision.

The first drama is seeing scripture – and the second drama is seeing Jesus. The 2 travelers near the village, and as it seems Jesus is going to continue on, they urge him to stay, and he does. But notice, notably, that the guest becomes the host – Jesus is at table with them and HE takes the bread – blesses – breaks – gives it to them...and THEN their eyes were opened and they recognize Jesus. At the start their eyes were kept from recognizing him – now their eyes are opened – what happened? Well, here’s what didn’t happen: Jesus sat at table with them and explained the doctrine of the atonement ...and then their eyes were opened – nope; Jesus sat at table and said – please read and sign this statement of faith...and then their eyes were opened – nope. No, the founding story of the church says this: it is in fellowship, communion, with the Risen Christ as our host that our eyes are opened to see our Lord among us. Those ‘taken- blessed – broken – given’ words and actions are what Jesus shared with his followers before his death and now again when he is Risen – they are the words that define Jesus as the Lord of life

who draws us into and nourishes his followers in that life. Such a life of love, of freedom, of hope – this is what opens eyes, hearts, lives to the Living God and to the way of life God gives.

Now my friends, I personally am a fan of doctrine and creeds and confessions, and I personally think Jesus is OK with those too. But we are not a people of doctrine, we are people in communion with Christ, given life and nourished by God's Spirit of life – we are not a people of theological principles, we are a sacramental people, hosted by God to receive the gifts of grace that open our eyes to who God is and who we are as the body of Christ. To see scripture through the resurrection and to see the Risen Lord calling us into communion – those are the ways of seeing that mark the church; and Luke tells that Emmaus story in such a way that it is as much our story, the church's story, today as it was for those 2 travelers on that day.

And just one last lovely thing about this story Luke gives: it's the road to Emmaus, but it's not certain where this Emmaus was; and the 2 travelers are Cleopas and someone else – but Cleopas is not famous (not an A-team disciple, but more a B-team level), and the other one, who knows? So really it's pretty much any old someone going to any old place – which is pretty much what the church is: not grounded in personality or place, but in the God who comes to us whoever and wherever we are. Probably that other person on the road is you or me - and as the Risen Christ speaks a living word to us this day, he is the host at the same table to nourish his church – chosen, blessed, broken and given to witness to the God of life among us. Oh, and James Alison says something else about that too! – but more about that later...☺ For now may this story burn in our hearts, calling us together to the table, where the Risen Lord is our host, and our eyes are opened to, our lives nourished in, the way of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.