

A Sermon by the Reverend John McDuffie
The Third Sunday of Easter
April 26, 2020

Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

“That same day (the first day of the week), two of Jesus’ followers were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.”

Thus begins our beautiful Gospel lesson today, my personal favorite Easter story, and one that has stimulated the religious imaginations of countless people over the centuries. We begin with the fact that no one knows exactly where Emmaus was, and is. If you go on a tour of the Holy Land today, you will likely be taken to Abu Ghosh, which is about seven miles west of Jerusalem, where there is a church built by the Crusaders and an adjoining Benedictine monastery—known for its production of limoncello liqueur, on sale at the gift shop. But your wise guide will tell you that no one can verify that this is the actual location of Emmaus. In one of his essays, the great preacher and author Frederick Buechner says that we might as well call Emmaus “Nowheresville”. These sad, disconsolate travelers were on the road to Nowheresville—think of the Talking Heads song, “We’re on the Road to Nowhere”. And maybe that’s just how some of us feel during these trying times we’re living in.

Invariably I also think of T.S. Eliot’s despairing poem of the early 1920’s, “The Wasteland”, in which the query is made in Part V of the poem,

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
--but who is that on the other side of you?*

In his footnotes to the poem Eliot remarks that he’s referring not only to Emmaus, but also to a report from the Antarctic expeditions of Shackelton, in which the overextended explorers reported having the consistent delusion that there was always one more than the actual number in their party.

Are we ultimately really on the road to nowhere? Are we living with a delusion? The answer, of course, for people of faith, is a resounding “Not so!” The late Henri Nouwen wrote an entire book on this Gospel passage called With Burning Hearts. With his customary luminosity, Nouwen tells us that the dynamic movement of this story is the same dynamic movement that we experience when we gather for the liturgy of the eucharist.

In his book The Dynamics of Religion, Bruce Reed likened the church to a filling station—We come together on Sundays after a long week, with the challenges and stresses of daily life, running sometimes almost “on empty”—not unlike the two sad travelers on the way to Emmaus. They encounter the Christ whom they don’t recognize, and he quotes scripture to them and gives an explication—just as we on Sundays in the liturgy of the Word hear scripture, and then, if the preacher is worth his or her salt, we hear an explication in a sermon that hopefully quickens our hearts and fills us with the longing for the promise of good news—which builds through our creedal affirmation, our confession and absolution, and the passing of the peace. We then move to the sharing of a sacred meal, just as the travelers invited Christ to stay with them for supper when they arrived at their destination. At table, as he takes bread, blesses it and breaks it, their eyes are opened and they see this stranger for whom he truly is—the resurrected Lord!—just as we reach a climactic moment in our liturgy when the celebrant elevates the host and proclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who takes away the sins of the world.” And we receive him in the sacred meal—“that he may dwell in us, and we in him”—and we are filled again with the presence of the Risen One, to carry him into the world—just as the travelers, with burning hearts, rush back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples that they have seen the Lord.

Sadly, we are missing this sacred meal as a gathered community, because of the pandemic. And I’m reminded of Bishop Michael Curry’s words in his Easter sermon two weeks ago: “It doesn’t look like Easter; it doesn’t feel like Easter; it doesn’t smell like Easter; but it is Easter.” We will not be filled with the presence of Christ in this sacred meal, at the present time—but it is Easter. I’m reminded in the Gospel of Matthew of what the angel said to the two women on Easter morning at the empty tomb: “He has been raised from the dead. And he is going ahead of you into Galilee; there you will see him.” It reminds me that the first message of Easter is, “Get up; start walking...” the word for “resurrection” in Greek is *anastasis*, which literally means “to stand again”. We’ve stumbled; we’ve fallen down, but let’s stand again and walk forward. Jesus is out there ahead of us somewhere, and we’re going to find him on the way, sooner or later.

Like the two travelers to Emmaus, we may not recognize him at first. I’m reminded of an old favorite story of mine, about the late Andre Previn, who passed away last year. If you’re well acquainted with the music world, you’ll know that Andre Previn as a young man lived in Hollywood where he composed and arranged film scores; later he became a renowned conductor, most notably with the London Symphony Orchestra. But he was also an accomplished pianist who sometimes played jazz. Sometime in the late 1940’s or early 1950’s Previn went to New York City for a visit, and met up with a friend, who said, “Andre, would you like to meet Bud Powell?” Bud Powell was one of the fathers of modern jazz piano, who played with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. “Yes,” said, Previn, “I’d very much like to meet him”. “Well”, his friend said “he’s playing tonight at a club, and I’ll introduce you to him.”

So Andre Previn went down to this particular club—I don’t know which one it was, and there were many along 52nd street in those days—and he arrived early and got a seat near the bandstand. His friend was not there, and, as it turned out, neither was Bud Powell. The musicians arrived, and began playing the first set—no Bud Powell. Previn decided to be patient and wait to see if his friend, and Bud Powell, would show up. The musicians went on their break, and then came back to play the second set—still no Bud Powell. Midway through the

second set a somewhat disheveled individual entered the club, took a vacant seat next to Andre Previn, and soon fell asleep on Previn's shoulder. "Great", thought Previn, "This is all I need." The second set concluded, and Previn was still sitting there when his friend finally showed up and said, "Andre, do you still want to meet Bud Powell?" "Yes," said a frustrated Previn. "Well", his friend replied, "he's sitting next to you—he's asleep on your shoulder." Andre turned to his left, and there was the great Bud Powell!

It is sometimes like that when we're hoping to meet Jesus in the journeys of our lives—we may not recognize him at first, and we might just discover that he's asleep on our shoulder!—well, maybe not—it may be more like he's six to eight feet away from us in this era of social distancing—but as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "Christ plays in 10,000 places." The Crucified and Risen one is out there, on the road, there to give us encouragement and caring in these trying times—watch for, and listen to his words, because he comes in different disguises, and be gratified that suddenly you may feel your heart strangely warmed, or indeed, burning! We're never headed on the road to Nowheresville; we're traveling in great hopefulness, because it's Easter!

Let me close with the collect for the presence of Christ from the service of evening prayer, which is based on our Gospel lesson:

Lord Jesus, stay with us, for evening is at hand and the day is now passed; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts, and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in scripture and in the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love. Amen.