

Acts 2:14a,36-41

Easter III
1 Peter 1:17-23
St. Mary the Virgin
April 30, 2017

Lk 24:13-35

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“He had been known to them in the breaking of the bread.” Amen.

In a central African village, a wise and respected Protestant minister had died. Sometime afterward, the elders recognized the presence of his spirit in his young granddaughter. She was renamed with her grandfather’s name, and she was given access to education and opportunities that normally went only to boys in their community. As Christians, the recognition of her grandfather’s spirit wasn’t about the practice of spiritism, reincarnation, or other traditions. Instead, it was about being open to encountering something special in another person that pushes aside the stereotypes and assumptions we otherwise might make, and social boundaries we tend to create.

This morning we hear assumptions at-play in the conversation between two downhearted followers of Jesus as they encounter a stranger on the road to Emmaus, not far from Jerusalem. Not only is this stranger assumed to be amazingly ignorant about what recently had happened, but they believe that their hope in Jesus as the Messiah has been shattered by his crucifixion. We hear in their story hints of deep sadness and affection. Jesus had opened up something in them. Perhaps, on the road to Emmaus, they were trying to sort out what it all had meant.

The stranger like a good rabbi encourages them to ponder the meaning of scripture they should have remembered. It also reminds us that spiritual strength and deep faith must come out of our own recognition and understanding of where God is at work in the world. We have the resources of scripture, our faith tradition, and our faith community, but we must actively participate in our own faith journey by making the connections. We must travel our road to Emmaus.

Although the African granddaughter had opportunities opened for her through spiritual connection with her grandfather, she also had to actively prove her abilities in the African educational system, and in places where girls were looked down upon or normally not allowed. For her, the name she now carried--and her faith that her grandfather’s spiritual wisdom would help guide her--gave her the strength to persist on her own road to Emmaus.

In the gospel, the two followers recognized something in the stranger through their conversation that prompted them to offer spontaneous and sincere hospitality to a person they didn’t know. In Mediterranean culture of that day, eating and staying together implied a bond of social solidarity.¹ It was risky to offer it to someone they did not know. Yet, the role of

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.

offering hospitality to the stranger in the Bible typically resulted in people entertaining, unaware, an angel or agent of the divine--in the Old Testament, and in the gospels where hospitality across social boundaries often involved the presence of Christ or Christ's teaching about inclusion. Only in response to the acts of hospitality is the divine made known and recognized. In giving the bread to the stranger to break and bless for them, the two followers' eyes were opened to the presence of Christ in their midst.

Spiritual hospitality requires us to share ourselves with others. It isn't just about providing food or shelter; instead, it is about inviting others into conversation, listening openly to what insights or wisdom another might offer from a different perspective, and pondering together the deeper meanings. We come to perceive Christ through hospitality, by opening and sharing ourselves with those who may differ from us. Sometimes the insights can be life-changing, as it was for those on the road to Emmaus. It also becomes a way of being, of the way of the heart.²

It was an act of spiritual hospitality, honoring how much the African minister had meant to the community, that opened the way for his granddaughter. So, too, our acts of hospitality that cross social boundaries or convention hold the potential for deepening our own faith.

At a large East Coast parish with a meals program that draws hundreds of people every week, the parishioners sit and eat with the guests rather than merely prepare and serve the meals. They began doing so as a way to break down the barriers between "us" and "them" that too often remain in many charitable programs. However, they quickly realized that *they* as hosts were the ones being enriched and nourished, as they learned about the world through the eyes of their guests. Several felt the presence of Christ at their tables. It also changed their thinking—and how they chose to act on their faith.

When we are truly open to Christ working through us and through others, it changes us. As we see from the Acts and 1 Peter passages, we are called to respond to the gift of new life through Christ by letting go of old behaviors, especially those that separate us from one another. Christians were to treat one another like family; this was what the church--as a community of faith--was intended to be. When Christians actively discerned and understood the spiritual truth of the gospel, it would cleanse their hearts so that God's authentic love might enter,³ and the light of Christ could shine through them. We see Christ through one another; neither we nor they are Christ, but through our actions Christ can be known.

Faith, therefore, carries a responsibility to actively live it out. The encounter on the road to Emmaus transformed the two followers, restoring their faith, and in response turned them into evangelists. For the African granddaughter, her responsibility was to carry on, in her own way, so that the spirit of God, which her grandfather had shared with his community, might continue

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry*. San Francisco, HarperOne, 2009.

³ Archibald M. Hunter, "Exegesis" [1 Peter], In *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, commentary editor, vol. viii. New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1952, p.104.

to shine through her. Her journey would lead her to ordination, and to places where grandfather hadn't been--to graduate work and a PhD in an American seminary and university. She would become internationally respected and active on both the American and African continents.

In my Easter sermon, I had mentioned my experience as a female Episcopal candidate for ordination at a Catholic church. It proved to be my own road to Emmaus. On the pastoral staff was a very conservative priest whom I had avoided as much as possible. One evening after dinner, as the others were leaving for meetings or pastoral calls, and I was planning to leave as well, this priest stopped me. He sat down, poured us both a glass of wine, and then said, "Now, tell me why you think you should be ordained." I assumed that I could never change his mind, so I simply talked honestly about my call and also about my anxieties and doubts. He didn't say much. As the months passed, we worked together briefly. One Sunday after Easter, he motioned me to come into the sacristy. As I entered, he looked at me and said, "Paula, when you're a priest, be sure to warm the water for babies at baptism so they won't cry. When you're are a priest," As he spoke, for about 45 minutes, I realized that he was mentoring me as he would do for male Catholic seminarians prior to their ordination. He repeated this on the following Sunday. Through the hospitality of the soul, a way of being and ministering together across steep boundaries, as priests in two denominations of Christ's church, had been found. Clearly, it hadn't come through clever arguments, but by the way of the heart. I know that I encountered Christ in his actions toward me. I was changed by the experience: I came to realize that Christ works through us when we are most open and authentic, in ways we may never know.

Where is your road to Emmaus taking you? Where might Christ be encountered and become known to you? And how are you being called to respond? At St. Mary's, today, we are beginning the first of several group discernment sessions that will be held over coming weeks, where people can explore their own pathways and can reflect on how their own faith journey might be calling them to be active in the world. There are many opportunities to explore different ways of offering—and being present—for spiritual hospitality, where we might encounter Christ anew, and where our faith becomes a verb. Amen.