

April 26, 2020
Third Sunday of Easter

Seventh Sunday of Livestreamed Worship
Due to COVID-19

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:28-35

Why We Need a Good Shepherd Now!



Rowan LeCompte and Irene Matz LeCompte
The Walk to Emmaus Mosaic

But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. – Luke 24:29

“How was your Passover?” “Did you enjoy your Easter?” Those are questions Christians and Jews typically ask each other this time of year, but this year the answers are ... different.

Nearly everyone worshiped on Easter, but not in a flower laden sanctuary. This year we worshiped in our living rooms and kitchens. We watched Pastor Jacob gobble jelly beans! We sang along with “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” like no one was listening, but of course, God was listening.

Some of us took walks after worship. Others Zoomed with our families. That’s what my family did – and it was good to “see” everyone together on the screen like the Brady Bunch (truly, we’ve never been much like the Brady Bunch).

We celebrated our little joys. Our niece adopted a golden retriever puppy. We’ve watched him double in size in the past few weeks. Our granddaughter had her 6 month birthday yesterday. She’s eating solid foods now and sitting up...a little. She has more personality than 3 people! We Facetime nearly every day, but it’s not the same as being there.

Being there matters. That’s the likely reason the two disciples at the center of today’s gospel walked the 7 miles from their home in Emmaus to Jerusalem for the Passover.

They were followers of Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth, serious disciples. They’d been there when he rode into the city on a donkey, in perfect fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy.

Crowds had cheered him then, called him Savior, but after that, things fell apart. What he did in the temple – turning over the tables of the price gougers and money changers, the ruling class did not like that. He challenged their authority and condemned their greed. It didn’t take long at all for them to have him arrested and quickly crucified.

That was three days ago, and now these two were headed home from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

The road spread out before them and one mile bled into the next. Some of the time they talked, but mostly they just ambled along in silence shuffling their feet along the dusty road.

Honestly, it was hard to talk – too hard to come up with words for what it had been like -- being there. What they'd seen had cost them their dream, their vision of a free Israel. Now, that hope was gone and they were just tired.

Maybe that's why they didn't recognize Jesus. The risen Christ came alongside them on the road, but in their exhaustion and grief they didn't know that it was Jesus.

What were you discussing back there on the road? Jesus wanted to know. They couldn't believe he'd asked that! Was he the only one in all Judea who hadn't heard about what happened to Jesus?

Not only that, they told him, some members of our group were at his tomb ... when they did not find his body... stolen, maybe, or moved...who knows? Some of the women said they had seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ⁱ Can you believe THAT?

The stranger shook his head. *Don't you know anything? Don't you understand that all this had to happen, the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory!?* Then starting with Moses, Jesus went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything the scriptures said about him. ⁱⁱ

Now, here's the rest of the story, from Luke 24, beginning at verse 28:

As they came near the village to which they were going, [Jesus] walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon." Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray to God:

Open our eyes, Loving God. Show us your power and gentle presence in ordinary things. Open our ears. Cut through the noise of our lives and allow us to hear only your voice. Open our hearts and allow us to recognize you in the simplest things: bread, a cup, moments shared. Today, and in all the days, stay with us, Lord. Surprise us with your word, and show us your glory. Amen.

If the risen Christ came alongside you on your walk this afternoon would you recognize him?
If he joined you at your breakfast table would you welcome him?

You know he's risen. He's risen and he's loose in the world in the Holy Spirit. Moving among us in powerful ways...often in quiet ways, ordinary moments.

Presbyterian minister and author Fred Buechner wrote:

“Sacred moments, the moments of miracles, are often everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only ... a garden, or a stranger coming down the road... a meal like any other meal.

But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our imaginations – if we live our lives, not from escape to escape, but from miracle of one instant ... to the miracle of the next ... what we may see is Jesus himself.”ⁱⁱⁱ

He's risen! He's with you now. Will we welcome him?

If you're like Patt Haun, and you grew up in the Moravian Church, or if you are of German descent, you probably grew up saying the Common Table Blessing:

Come, Lord Jesus, our Guest to be
And bless these gifts bestowed by Thee.

That's solid theology. Everything we have, every moment we enjoy is a blessing from God. To invite Jesus into our homes, to share our meals with us, and to be a part of our everyday moments, is simply acknowledging what has been true all along.

-- It all belongs to him! This is his house, his yard, his television set with the stack of magazines beside it, his car in the driveway, his children's photos on the piano. Every precious moment, every good gift comes from him, belongs to him.

The two disciples – most likely husband and wife – these two who met Jesus on the Emmaus Road must have understood that at some level. They were generous and eager to share. In spite of the terrible grief they felt, they offered their hospitality, in fact they begged him:

*“Stay with us.” ...
So he went in to stay with them.
When he was at the table with them,
he took [simple] bread,
blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.*

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized what had been true all along --

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. And he is with you at the breakfast table.

He's in every note of the music lovingly played, and in the warm, soapy water as you wash your hands. He's in the sunrise that comes without you having to ask, and in the voice of a friend on the telephone. Everyday moments are his creation. The poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

“Natural things
And spiritual – who separates the two...

Without the spiritual
The natural’s impossible...

Earth is crammed with heaven,
and every bush afire with God
but only he sees who takes off his shoes;
The rest sit around and pluck blackberries
And daub their natural faces unaware.”^{iv}

We don’t know why the two disciples from Emmaus were unaware that it was Jesus beside them on the road. Probably the same reason Mary Magdalene mistook him for the gardener on Easter morning. Anger, anxiety, and grief do terrible things to our vision. Somehow, this couple managed to overcome all that and insist that Jesus share their home.

That was when it happened...when he took the bread and blessed it, and their eyes were opened and they recognized him! To their credit these two didn’t sit around congratulating each other on their good fortune. No, immediately they hit the road -- running all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the others what had happened...how they took off their shoes, reclined at the table, and received bread from his hand. And in that moment – they knew it was Jesus They recognized him!

Ordinary places become holy ground when we recognize him. We too ought to beg him to *Stay with us*. We need him now, don’t we? We always have -- needed him. But this pandemic – it’s different. It has socked us in the gut in a way even 9/11 and the crash of 2008 did not.

How in the world do we open our eyes and recognize him in this present situation?

I have been praying over and studying that question since this whole thing began. Here is what I have discovered, with a lot of help from Gene Peterson, who wrote a beautiful book called Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life.^v It’s as if Peterson, who was once a pastor in our Baltimore Presbytery, anticipated our current situation.

Maybe all this is not as unprecedented as we think. Defining moments like this are not new. In fact, they are all too common. Things fall apart. That is when Jesus comes. He breaks in – interrupting our conversation or the movie we’re watching. But usually not; it’s not his way to scream over the television!

More often he comes in the evening after a long, hard day...or in the silence of early morning the way he appeared on the beach after his disciples had been out fishing all night and caught nothing.^{vi}

He comes in the simplest and most startling moments like this one – when we offer him what we have to share.

Jesus takes what we bring him – our bread, our fish, our wine ... our sins...our work... our strength, our weakness...whatever we have ...whatever we are. Jesus takes it – he takes us.

Jesus blesses and gives thanks for what we bring... he takes it to the Father. He offers us up and folds us into the promise and work of God. He doesn't criticize or condemn or reject our offering. He never will. I mean, can you imagine him saying, "Five loaves and two fish, really? Is that all you can come up with?" No! He takes what we offer him, and he breaks it. That's a moment, isn't it? A humbling, sometimes painful moment because we like our self-sufficiency...we like to think that our best efforts are enough.

Ah, but in his hands ...he takes what we bring and he breaks it because, Peterson says:

“He’s after what’s inside... at his table we’re not permitted to be self-enclosed. We’re not permitted to remain self-sufficient. [He breaks] our pride and self-approval and opens us up to new life.”

He shatters our prejudices and all the ways we’ve hardened ourselves from within. As the psalmist says, *a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*^{vii}

It's not only you and I who are broken, he was broken too...broken for you, his blood poured out for you. And here at his table our eyes are opened and we recognize that his brokenness is how we are made whole.

He takes what we bring. He blesses and gives thanks for it. He breaks it, and then he gives us back what we gave him – what we are. But it's no longer what we brought. After that we are different.

As we sing “Abide with Me,” we realize that he has absolutely, already come to live with us, in us. Transformation happens as we eat and drink his consecrated body and blood. Ordinary elements – wheat and grapes, like all the plain moments of our lives become holy when we offer them to God.

Let's pray:

Stay with us, Lord Jesus. Evening is past and morning is here. We offer our new week to you. Come and help us. Heal us quickly, Lord. Heal our world. Touch us with your Holy Spirit and grant us peace. Amen.

ⁱ Luke 24:22-24

ⁱⁱ Luke 24: 25-27 *The Message*

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, HarperOne, 1985, 86-87

^{iv} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Aurora Leigh” *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, Nicholson & Lee, 1917, 86

^v Eugene Peterson, *Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life*, NavPress, 2020, 79ff

^{vi} John 21:1-14

^{vii} Psalm 51:17