

“A Celebration of Absence?”

Luke 24: 13 -35

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More and more I find it so intriguing to consider the why of the gospel stories and especially the post resurrection appearance stories. Today's may be THE most intriguing of them all though. As I said in my article for the April Caravan, our church newsletter, it has become my favorite Easter story and in part that's because it contains so many things – mystery, learning/teaching, a surprise ending, actually two! What more do we need?

Consider the story – two people are walking down the road on their way to Emmaus, a town several miles from Jerusalem and as they walk, they are suddenly joined by stranger who after inquiring of them regarding what it was they were discussing. At first disdainful and then disbelieving, they reply with an early formulaic confession of faith regarding Jesus as Christ. And the stranger then begins to teach them new things regarding their understanding of the Bible or actually the Torah. Arriving at Emmaus, the two participants in our story invite Jesus to eat with them but when he takes the bread, blesses it, and then breaks it they realize who this is. And bingo, just as that happens, guess what – Jesus disappears! And the two return to Jerusalem to report this happening to the “eleven”, which I assume to mean that the two were not disciples as the eleven means the disciples less Judas. And though initially ignored due to the excitement of the others that Jesus had appeared to Simon, though there is no other attribution or story regarding this, the two tell the gathered folk their story.

As we exegete this story, that is examine it closely and seek meaning from its setting, original audience, and word usage, there are several things I think we should take note of in seeking to understand or glean meaning from it. In no particular order let's delve into some of these. First, in verses 19 to 24 we have a confession of faith which can be seen as formulaic and which encapsulates all that the early church believed about Jesus. It confesses Jesus as a mighty prophet who did wondrous things and who was condemned and crucified by the Romans after being handed over by the leaders and priests. It's interesting that the text includes no mention of the Romans but assumes that the reader/hearer would understand that only the Romans crucified people. The confession also includes the resurrection story of Luke with the women acting as the first witnesses to the resurrection. Now compare this with the ending verses of our pericope where upon their return to Jerusalem and the eleven, where they are told that Jesus has appeared to Simon Peter!

We don't like to think about it but the early church and its various witnesses often reveal to us the struggles which were taking place as it, the church sought to define itself and what its message would be. I think in this pericope we have a glimpse of one of these struggles. The confession that it was the women who discovered the empty tomb and the women who heard the message from angels that Jesus had gone ahead to Galilee is one our pericope offers. It is contradicted or at least pushed aside by the appearance

confession offered by the eleven when our two travelers return to Jerusalem. I want to offer the idea that what we are seeing here is the conflict in the early church over who knew the risen Christ first and therefore who ought be looked to for leadership. If it is to Peter that the risen Christ first appears then it is Peter to whom the church ought look first for leadership and that leadership is based in Jerusalem where the eleven first heard and knew the risen Christ.

It is important, I believe, that we keep in mind that the church is not a defined entity whose presence is fulfilled here, now. The church is a process based institution which is forever evolving and changing. It is not a place of dogmatic faith and definition but rather a place of community and conversation. And remember community and conversation are activities, entities which embody novelty, newness, difference and change. Who wants to talk to the same person about the same thing every day, all the time and know that nothing new will be discovered, change will not take place? And what community is built upon dogma? The joy, hope, and promise of Presbyterianism and Protestantism is that we build congregations, worshiping communities upon conversation and a republican democracy or democratic ideal. Our church changes and reinterprets what it means to be the church on a regular basis. We need hold high the theological idea of democracy and its reality. That means that dogma has no place here. We are a community in which we offer forth our ideas of faith but don't demand that those ideas prevail unless or until they are run through the wringer of the community and its discernment process. (OOPS I used that forbidden word, excuse me.) And that process will have winners and losers. But even the losers win if they recognize that it is God who is part of the process and through what we call the Holy Spirit we know and embrace new understandings which reflect God's presence here, now. And winning doesn't mean domination but the opportunity to learn and grow with others. God's participation, while we like to think of it as joyous and welcome, can be daunting, challenging, and unwanted when it calls us to change.

The second I draw from this reading is that we don't always recognize God's presence until that presence has participated with us and then seemingly disappeared. The story is almost comical in its sacramental act. The stranger at dinner takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them and suddenly they realize who this is! And when they do he vanishes! The travelers admit that while he had been with them and explaining the scriptures to them, their hearts were burning, a time sensitive reference to the first century understanding of the heart as the center of the body and the place from which all things emanated. A burning heart symbolized not simply love but also intellectual engagement and learning, I think. So these two after spending some time listening to and learning from this stranger, finally figure out that this is the risen Christ but the minute they do, he leaves the building!

In our time, people are forever telling us that they know what God is saying, where God is located, and/or what we should be doing in response to God's word. The message of this pericope should remind us that we don't always recognize or know what it is God calls us to do or that it is God who is calling us! What a simple message this is yet so often those who pontificate and announce their receipt of God's word seemingly ignore

that it is from the stranger and the unknown that we so often receive such messages. And what starts as a disdainful misunderstanding leads to enlightenment and acknowledgement. Two cannot believe that anyone had not heard of the death of Jesus at the hands of the Romans! How could this event which was so impactful to them not be known by others? But it is this stranger who enlightens them and eventually unmasks himself to be the risen Christ. The revelations of God's presence are blocked by our arrogance and self assurance when we become convinced that our worldview is God's and our values are God's. The story ought open us to the possibility that God's presence and values are often presented to us from those whom we find to be out of touch, not in the loop. It isn't the degree, the political party, nor the economic pedigree which us to that presence and those values. It is a willingness to be surprised, to wonder which opens us to the presence and to know that presence. Locking in to our expectations and our visions blocks God's presence from us.

Finally, we might learn from this is that God's presence is available to all without regard and that presence may be known anywhere. Note that our two protagonists are not members of the "eleven" and they encounter the risen Jesus not in Jerusalem but on the road. We may pass over this rather easily but in reality both of these play an enormous role in the story for the first century hearer/reader. Both break down any exclusivity of opportunity to know the presence of God or the risen Christ as well as any attempt to make this presence geographically limited. Remember the temple in Jerusalem was celebrated not simply as the center of the religious nation but the very dwelling place of God. The appearance of Jesus to these two non-insiders and at a place outside Jerusalem were key symbols for the early church in its evangelism and outreach to other parts of the world and other people besides the Jewish Christian community.

We need remind the world that our faith is a faith in a God who is not limited to any particular place or space. It is not our church buildings nor even our Sunday worship times and services which delineate God's presence. We believe in a God who participates with us at all times and in all places. AND God's love and participation is not limited by the race, sex, sexual orientation, nationality nor any other human situation or characteristic. God's presence and participation can be known by all. The road to Emmaus story is a quirky tale which encourages us to know and participate with God in all places and times. And our ministry is limited only by our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love and not by God's. AMEN.