

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER, A
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
I Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

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Portland, Oregon
April 23, 2023

When Jesus rose from the dead, he didn't appear in dramatic ways. Jesus showed himself to his followers in the most ordinary settings, in a garden, a home, on a beach next to fishing boats, at a table during dinner. And this is how the risen Jesus comes to us, too, in everyday life, in ordinary events that become sacred because God is there.

I have a friend I've known over 20 years. We get together every so often and we go walking. Walking and talking. We walk for miles, and on the way we talk about everything – joys and struggles – though you know we tend to talk more about the troubles, the questions, the thorny situations, because walking and talking is one of the best ways to hash things out. Work challenges, money issues, family, parenting, dealing with schools, doctors, death and grief... On the one hand it's the most ordinary thing in the world – downloading with an old friend – but on the other hand it is something holy, it is sacred, because companionship is God's gift, and working things through with another human being is a genuine blessing.

This is the kind of ordinary-yet-sacred setting where the risen Jesus appeared in today's scripture. Two disciples were walking and talking the seven miles between Jerusalem and Emmaus, hashing things out. We don't know exactly who they were – one was named Cleopas, and it's very possible the companion was his wife.

We don't know why they were headed to Emmaus, headed away from Jerusalem where other disciples were still hunkering down together after Jesus' crucifixion. Maybe this couple had obligations to tend to back home, or maybe they'd had enough of disappointment and decided there was no point in sticking around. As a way of coping, these two were puzzling things through on their way home.

And a stranger (who was Jesus) walked beside Cleopas and his partner a long way on that road, just listening to them give voice to their sadness and confusion. The stranger seemed to honor the fact that people don't bounce back immediately from traumatic events – like the cross, like grief, like disappointment, like cancer, like divorce, like pandemic even. It takes time to recover. "We had hoped," the disciples kept saying, shaking their heads. They didn't realize Jesus was right there.

That's often the way it is with us. We can be walking right beside Christ and not realize he's there. The truth is, we are always walking beside Christ, our Lord is always

journeying with us, always accompanying us, and only sometimes do we recognize him. Very often we are preoccupied, distracted, worried – and when worry has us in its grip, it puts us on the lookout for danger and threats, not beauty and comfort and hope.

Yet to these disappointed, slow-hearted disciples, Jesus showed wonderful kindness. He didn't scold them, instead he listened, for miles. He was patient, he took the time they needed. He didn't interrupt. He let them talk out their hopes and fears and confusion. Then he went over scripture with them, pointing out the ways their teacher's death could be part of God's saving work.

And at last there came that wonderful moment when the disciples finally recognized the risen Jesus. It all came together and God opened their eyes through gifts God also gives to us. It happened at the supper table, at the end of the day, when Jesus "*took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them*" – just the way Jesus broke bread for the five thousand, just the way he broke bread at the Last Supper... All of a sudden the ground shifted, and it all came together. They *knew* him. They recognized Jesus in broken bread, the same bread we share in Holy Communion. The same place Christ reveals himself to us, even today.

Then Jesus vanished. I've often wondered why he didn't stick around after they recognized him. We don't know, but this passage does tell that Jesus left those disciples with what they needed to meet him again, to meet him risen, in many other places and times. In fact, this passage is a reminder that Jesus has given all of us three specific ways to meet him again – *in the stories of faith, in the meal of Communion, and in each other*. These three things are marks of the church. They are ordinary yet sacred ways that we can count on meeting the risen Jesus today.

We can count on meeting Jesus in the stories of faith – Bible stories – the same words of Scripture that Jesus opened up for the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Sometimes we might take the Bible for granted, it might seem ordinary to us, but truly the Bible is the church's treasure. Through the Bible we get to know know God's character, God leading slaves to freedom across the Red Sea. Jesus feeding 5,000 tired and hungry people with just a little bread and a couple fish. Jesus fearlessly touching a leper, something nobody else would do. Jesus telling amazing stories: about a prodigal son being welcomed home and forgiven after squandering everything, about a good Samaritan taking care of a gravely wounded man the holy people wouldn't help. Besides the church, there's nowhere else in our secular society where people treasure these stories that reveal God's character and love. We don't have to be Bible scholars to let faith stories live in our imagination and hearts. It's one way we meet the risen Jesus today.

We also meet Jesus in the meal of Holy Communion. The Lord's Supper is made up of the most ordinary earthly things, a little bit of bread, a sip of wine or juice, but through these ordinary elements, Jesus has promised to be present with us, to meet us and nourish us. Jesus gives us bread and wine, here in worship every week, as a means to connect with God spiritually – a gift of Christ's presence that is always available to us, something we can count on.

Finally, Jesus gives us each other, the gift of Christian community, as a way to meet Jesus risen today. Christ has promised, "*Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them*" (Mt 18:20) and in the church we keep on discovering the many dimensions of what this means, how we encourage one another in faith and support one another in struggle. God gives us the treasure of partners in faith to puzzle life through with. We pray for each other. We help each other. We belong to each other in Christ, so the relationships we share in faith, ordinary as they might seem, are also sacred, holy, to be treasured.

Through these gifts Jesus gave long ago, our Lord still gives us what we need to recognize Jesus with us today. We have the Bible and its stories, we have the Holy Meal, we have each other. We have what we need. And it is enough. These simple, holy gifts are enough to carry the people of faith until we meet Jesus again.

Somehow it was enough for those disciples at Emmaus. Enough to send them running back down the road to Jerusalem after dinner time—seven miles, running, in the dark! Running to tell the others: *He is risen, the grave couldn't hold him! He's alive with us, now!*

Because of Easter, we can expect Jesus, risen from the dead, to be a part of our life. We can expect Jesus to join us, when and where we need God's presence. Expect Jesus. Be open to Christ's presence in our days. And ask God's help in recognizing God's presence so we do not feel so alone. Because new life walks alongside us, patiently, whether we know it or not. Faith is not an arrival, it's a journey, it's a long walk, a walk that takes a lifetime. And we are never alone on this journey. Christ journeys with us. The Risen Christ walks beside us.

Holding onto these promises, I invite you, in Christ's name, to join in the Holy Meal we share today. The same simple meal Jesus shared at Emmaus, God still shares with us. Bread broken and wine poured. Our risen Savior is with us here and now, at this table, just as he promised. To this meal, we bring all of who we are, and Christ meets us with all that Christ is.

Thanks be to God. Amen.