

“At Home with the Lord”

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

Sometimes, home is the place you go when you have no other options.

This appears to be the situation that impels the two travelers in today’s Gospel lesson to return to their home village of Emmaus after having spent time in Jerusalem. They were probably among the group of unnamed disciples (*“the eleven and all the rest”* – Luke 24:9) to whom the women reported what had happened when they went to the tomb where Jesus had been laid after his death at Golgotha on Good Friday, of how they found the stone rolled away and the body of Jesus missing. Then they reported the presence of *“two men in dazzling clothes”* who asked the women *“why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”* (24:4-5). They heard this news and the reminder that *“he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again”* (24:7); but such news seemed to the disciples – included the two on the road to Emmaus – to be *“an idle tale, and they refused to believe them”* (24:11). The disciples were too caught up in grief and fear to even consider that the report of the women was true, that Jesus had risen from the dead, overcoming the power of death that was still enslaving all of them.

The two travelers began their journey home to Emmaus because they felt they had no other options. All the hopes that they had placed in Jesus as the Messiah were gone, destroyed by the Romans when they crucified the one they had hoped *“was the one to redeem Israel”* (24:21). There was nothing left for them in Jerusalem or any other place; the only option was to return home to Emmaus and get on with whatever was left for them after this devastating loss and disappointment.

As the disciples are walking along the seven-mile road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, they are so caught up in conversation *“about all these things that had happened”* (24:14) that they did not recognize a third traveler who was walking alongside them. Luke reports that *“Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him”* (24:15-16). This is the first time the Risen Lord appears in Luke’s Gospel, and one may wonder how the disciples could not have recognized

the one with whom they had spent so much time; but this is not the first time a person has failed to recognize one who was sent by the Lord:

- “So Tobias went out to look for a man to go with him to Media, someone who was acquainted with the way. He went out and found the angel Raphael standing in front of him, but he did not perceive that he was an angel of God.” – Tobit 5:4.

We are told that “*their eyes were kept from recognizing him,*” which gives us a clue as to how this story unfolds, beginning with Jesus asking his fellow travelers “*what are you discussing with each other while you walk along?*” (24:17). This causes them to stop in their tracks, amazed that someone coming from Jerusalem has not heard of what had happened on the previous Friday. One of the disciples, who is not identified as Cleopas, expresses his incredulity at the stranger’s ignorance: “*Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?*” (24:18). When Jesus asks them “*what things?*” (knowing fully well, of course, what has happened), Cleopas responds with a Christological confession and a summary of the passion narrative in Luke:

- “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” – 24:19-21.

Cleopas’ summary characterizes the response of “the people” as a positive one in contrast to the “chief priests and leaders” who handed Jesus over to be crucified. By speaking of Jesus as the hoped-for Redeemer of Israel – of whom Zechariah sang as he held his infant son John (“*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.*” – 1:68), Cleopas echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah who spoke of the coming Redeemer of God’s people:

- “Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you insect Israel! I will help you, says the LORD; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.” – Isaiah 41:14.
- “Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: For your sake I will send to Babylon and break the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation.” – Isaiah 43:14.

Cleopas does not yet understand the irony of his words. He had hoped that Jesus would fulfill the Scriptures but saw his death – which was indeed the fulfillment – as only the frustration of the hope of these two disciples. This irony is compounded

by his report that “yes, and besides all this, it is not the third day that these things took place” (24:21), forgetting that Jesus’ passion predictions always ended with the assurance that he would “on the third day be raised” (9:22), a day Christians would forever celebrate with joy. Cleopas goes on to summarize the discovery of the empty tomb and how the failure to see the Risen Lord had created confusion regarding its meaning:

- “Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find the body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.” – 24:22-24.

Again, there is irony in Cleopas’ words: the two were confused because Peter had not seen Jesus, but here they are in the presence of the Risen Lord and still do not understand.

After having listened patiently to Cleopas’ interpretation of what had happened in Jerusalem, Jesus finally responds to his fellow travelers, beginning the process of revealing himself and the meaning of the resurrection to these disciples. The revelation of the Easter reality begins with the fulfillment of the Scriptures, and Jesus chastises his disciples for failing to see this fulfillment: “*Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!*” (24:25). The suffering of the Messiah was necessary in God’s providential plan for the redemption of Israel and the salvation of sinners. It was necessary for Jesus to go to Jerusalem and suffer and die there; it was necessary that the Scriptures be fulfilled in Jesus:

- “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.” – 13:32-33.
- “For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.” – 23:37.

The Risen Lord again takes on the role of a teacher: “*then beginning with Moses and all the prophet, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures*” (24:27). Jesus alludes to the prophetic teaching of Isaiah that speaks of a Suffering Servant who will bear the iniquities of all God’s people to be the one who will accomplish God’s redemption for all:

- “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” – Isaiah 53:4-6.

Jesus’ teaching with his fellow travelers continues until they come near to the village of Emmaus, at which point he walks ahead of them as if he is continuing his journey. At this point, the disciples’ instinct for hospitality kicks in; they strongly urge their fellow traveler to “*stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over*” (24:29). Jesus accepts their offer of hospitality and enters their home, where he sits down to share the evening meal with them. It was customary for hosts to invite their honoured guests to offer a blessing for the meal; so “*when he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.*” (24:30). It is at this moment that an *anagnorisis* takes place, a recognition scene in classical drama. The *anagnorisis* is reported as the opening of the disciples’ eyes: “*Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight*” (24:31). Now that they have experienced this recognition that the one with whom they had journeyed and sat at table was the Risen Lord, they ask each other how it could be that they did not realize fully how their “*our hearts [were] burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*” (24:32). They realize that “*through their concern to provide hospitality to a stranger, the disciples’ sadness, foolishness, and slowness of heart are transformed into joy, insight, and joyful recommitment to Jesus’ way*” (Robert J. Karris). As the first witnesses to the Risen Lord, the disciples respond as other witnesses of Christ’s Resurrection: they leave their home and return to Jerusalem, which is no longer a place that they had left in their past but now one that was filled with hope as they find the other disciples where they had left them. These disciples share their excitement as they share what has happened since they left Jerusalem for Emmaus: “*The Lord is risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!*” (24:34), which Paul will confirm in his account of the resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians:

- “For I handed over to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” – 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

Cleopas and his companion then share with these Jerusalem disciples their experience of being in the presence of the Risen Lord, *“how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”* (24:35).

- “Even all mixed up in confusion and joy, Jesus’ appearances to these disciples commission them to tell more than mere ghost stories or memories of a bygone teacher. This unghostly Jesus promises power from God to tell the story of justice’s possibilities, of God’s mercy in the world, of enduring love. As readers of the story, we find our place when Luke’s Jesus reminds us, ‘you are witnesses of these things.’ (24:48)” – Katherine A. Shaner.

The disciples who were returning home to Emmaus because they believed that there were no other options now return to Jerusalem in the joyful assurance that no matter where they may find themselves physically, they are always home because they know that the Risen Lord will abide with them no matter where they may find themselves. As the Risen Lord reveals himself to them in the meal they share, so we believe that our Lord is present with us in both Word and Sacrament. When we hear the words of Holy Scripture, we believe that they are not merely words from ancient manuscripts written to people who lived centuries before us, but are the living Word of God from the one who is the *“Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14). When we gather at the Lord’s Table, we believe that the meal we share is not merely a memorial of what happened on the night Jesus was betrayed, but that we are in the real presence of our Redeemer as we partake of *“the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.”* (Small Catechism). As the presence of the Risen Lord transformed the lives of those disciples who believed they were out of options, so does *“his presence at the table make all believers first-generation Christians and every meeting place Emmaus.”* (Fred Craddock). It also inspires us, like these transformed disciples, to witness to what we have seen and heard. Having turned from sadness and despair by being at table with the Risen Christ they now recognize *“in the breaking of the bread,”* the excitement of Cleopas and his companion moves them naturally to return to Jerusalem and their brothers and sisters who had been trapped in the same hopelessness following the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. The joy that they share at their reunion will be confirmed when the Risen Lord stands among them and greets them with the words *“peace be with you”* (24:36), opening their minds to understand the scriptures and commissioning them to be witnesses to all they have seen and heard so that others may know that home is not only the place to which you return when you feel that you have no other options; home is any location we may find ourselves, because wherever we may be we are always in the presence of our

Risen Lord who assures his followers to remember that *“I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20).

- “‘You are witnesses of these things,’ he told them before he left them entrusting the world to their care. When that world looks around for the risen Christ, when they want to know what that means, it is us they look at. Not our pretty faces and not sincere eyes but our hands and feet p what we have done with them and where we have gone with them. We are witnesses of these things. We are still the body of Christ.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

They are many reasons for us to join Cleopas and his companion on the journey to Emmaus or wherever our hometown may be; but we do not travel home because we believe that we have no other option. Because of the good news proclaimed by the eyewitnesses to the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we know that wherever we are – at home or far from home – we are at home with the Lord in the assurance that Christ is with us in his Holy Word and his Holy Supper. Our crucified and risen Lord abides with us always, the one who promised that he is *“the resurrection and the life,”* offering his people both *“strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow”* (ELW Hymn 733), offering the blessed hope that *“those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”* (John 11:25-26).

- “He is the ‘life’ because through baptism he gives a new spiritual life, the living water of the Holy Spirit, to those who believe in him. This life is a participation in the divine communion, and it is enjoyed by believers in the present. As C.H. Dodd succinctly puts it, ‘Whether the gift of eternal life is conceived as a present and continuing possession or as a recovery of life after the death of the body and be the end of the world, the thing that matters is that life is the gift of Christ, which is Himself.’” – Francis Martin and William Wright.

We do not know if Cleopas and his companion ever returned to Emmaus; but if they did, it was not because they felt they had no other options, that there was no hope left for them anyplace else. Be it in Emmaus, Jerusalem, or wherever their mission as witnesses to the death and resurrection of Christ might take them, they knew that they were always at home because they were always in the presence of the Lord who defeated the powers of sin, death, and the devil that seek to separate us from God’s love so that at all times and in all places we might know that we *“belong to him, live under his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and*

blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.” (Small Catechism).

Wherever we are, we are always at home, because we are always in the presence of our Risen Lord who abides with us, strengthens us, provides for us, and one day will gather us together into our eternal home. We are always at home because of the good news of Easter: **Christ the Lord is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Amen.