

April 30, 2006
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Psalm 4, Luke 24:13-35

"The Mystery of Christ's Presence"

The last Easter lily has faded; the Easter trumpets are silent now. The final echo of the Easter proclamation, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed," has died away. There can be a kind of let down after Easter - post Easter blues. We wonder if anything has changed. Are we different from the way we were before this day of days? Do we go back to where we were and what we did before Easter as if nothing ever happened? We face the same question the first disciples faced, "Where is the risen Lord to be found?"

On the evening of the first Easter, two disciples are walking from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. Along the way, they are having an intense discussion about the events of the last week in the life of Jesus. They are wondering if the testimony of the women who claim to have seen Jesus can possibly be true. They have not seen the risen Lord. The death of Jesus has crushed their hopes and they cannot yet believe the women. They know all about death; but they are unsure about life. If Jesus is alive, then where is he? Sometimes, I think this story is remembered and told just for us who live so many centuries after that first Easter. We live so much of our lives struggling to believe, hungry to know and eager to experience his presence. Can it be true?

Suddenly, these two men are joined by a stranger who walks with them and enters into their conversation. The men are astonished that the stranger does not seem to know what has been going on in Jerusalem. When they pour out the story, the stranger interprets what they have seen and heard in light of the witness of scriptures. It is the scripture that make sense of their experiences in the past week. The stranger becomes their teacher.

Evening comes. They urge the stranger to stay with them. They extend to him the grace of hospitality. The guest becomes the host. The stranger sits at table and takes the bread, blesses the bread, breaks the bread and gives it to them to eat. Suddenly, their eyes are opened and they see him as he is. The stranger is the risen Lord. They see him in the familiar gesture of taking, blessing, breaking and giving the bread. We can image that they have seen Jesus do these simple actions many times.

They recognize him in the familiar gestures in the same way we recognize those we know in the sound of a voice, the shape of a head, a particular walk or a familiar act. As soon as they recognize him, Jesus vanishes from their sight.

Sometimes, I think this story is told just for us who live so many centuries after the first Easter. This story tells us that when Jesus comes among us, he always comes as a surprise. He may be here all along; but we do not even see his presence. His presence comes as an unexpected gift, experienced in the fellowship of the church. Just as he came to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, so Jesus comes to us in the company of others. Jesus

said that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he is in the midst of them. He promises that he will be with us forever, even when we don't recognize or acknowledge his presence. We do not control his coming, nor do we determine his leaving. We simply receive his gracious presence as a gift.

I am convinced that Luke offers these words for the times in our lives when there are not trumpets, when all the flowers have faded and when our faith is at its lowest ebb. He tells us that we come to see Christ in fellowship with one another in the community of faith. He comes to us as we open the Bible and understand its message. Martin Luther believed that the key to the value of a portion of scripture is the extent to which the passage reveals Christ to us. We read and study the Bible together, not primarily to learn facts, ancient history or moral laws, but to encounter Christ, the risen Lord. Christ is the surprising gift when we read the Bible with understanding and faith. The disciples say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Christ is present with them even before they recognize him.

The first disciples discovered that Christ is known not only through opening the word of God but in these moments of gathering around the table. Sharing in this holy meal is not about remembering Jesus as an historical figure from the distant past. Here, in bread and wine, we encounter the mysterious presence of Christ, the risen Lord. Christ says, "This is my body. This is my blood." Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are brought into the presence of the risen Lord.

It is here, in the fellowship of the church, where we practice hospitality to one another and to the stranger among us, where we read the Scriptures with faith, expectation and understanding and where we celebrate this meal of bread and wine, that we discover the risen Lord is present among us. When we encounter him here in the church, we are given the eyes to see him in the world. The Lord comes as a gift we cannot control. We can receive him only in faithful gratitude and joyful thanksgiving.

When I was in my first year of seminary, I wondered where Jesus could be found. I read all about him in my courses on the Bible; I learned what Christians were supposed to do in my class on ethics; I began to learn about the way God's people have moved through the centuries in my class on church history; I was beginning to be able to talk about the ways of God in my classes on theology. But, where was this risen Lord to be seen, experienced and known?

That same year, I began working in a Presbyterian congregation several miles from the seminary. It was not an especially beautiful church building; it did not have a grand organ or an exceptionally talented choir. What it did have was a community of believers who opened my eyes to the presence of the risen Lord. It was not only what they said; it was how they lived. They practiced hospitality to one another. They welcomed strangers without questioning how they looked, dressed or what they thought. They gave of themselves in caring for one another, in teaching the children, in visiting the lonely and in serving in the community. I watched how older youth in the group took the time to talk to and welcome younger, shy and sometimes awkward youth. The pastor of the church was a man of character and faith who was fair, compassionate, kind and courageous. They taught

me how to see Jesus - who was there in every act of kindness, in every word of encouragement and in every deed faithfully done. They helped me see the connection between all I was learning in seminary and the life of Christ's people. They gave me the eyes to see his healing presence in a shattered world.

Where is the risen Lord to be found? He is here among us when we welcome the stranger, live with courage, practice hospitality, demonstrate kindness and care for one another. He is here among us as we open the Scriptures and share the bread and wine.