

*The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! So, what are we going to do now?*

This famous story, with which Luke comes toward the end of his Gospel, seems somehow so familiar. It is about 2 disciples on a 7 mile journey from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. I'm guessing you have heard it before. By the way, have you noticed how many, many of our Bible stories are about characters travelling from one place to another? Think of the Israelites traveling across the desert to the Promised Land. Think of Paul on the road to Damascus. Think of Jesus on the way to the cross. And sometimes on a donkey, like Mary and Joseph on the way to Bethlehem, or Jesus riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Sometimes the journey is by boat, like Noah and his family, or even in the belly of a big fish like Jonah being returned to the assignment God has given him. We are a mobile faith; no moss grows under our feet! This story is so well-known, in fact, that there are hundreds of paintings which illustrate it. Most of them show two men walking with a white-clothed, glowing Jesus through an idyllic forest glade, which bears no resemblance to anywhere within 7 miles of Jerusalem. This seven-mile hike would have been over rocky and barren ground. And I want to go out on a limb and question the representation of the two disciples as men. If you read the text closely, you'll find that the companion of Cleopas is not referred to as a male, nor given a name. If you look at the image I chose for your bulletin cover this morning, you'll see Jesus, the man Cleopas, and a woman with a basket. I'm wondering if Luke, bless his heart, meant the companion to be a woman, though he might not have had the hutzpah to say so.

Rather than taking a fun Sunday stroll to Emmaus, Cleopas and his significant other are probably thinking that it would be a good time to get out of town. The city, and their lives in general, are in turmoil: There was an earthquake in Jerusalem; the temple curtain was torn in two; some graves were opened and the dead roamed the streets; they hear that Judas has committed suicide, and all manner of other rumors. It is said that the disciples have locked themselves away for fear of the bloodthirsty authorities, and some of the women are insisting that they found Jesus' tomb empty this morning and saw a vision of angels. The women told a story about Jesus being raised from the dead, but most, over the last few hours, have thought it to be idle wishful-thinking. But, if they're right, what would Jesus be thinking of us who all ran away when he was being crucified? We think that he might be really angry with us, and even punish us if he's able. This would be a really good time to get away someplace, someplace more peaceful, until things settle down and get back to normal. Even if that place is only in our own minds. What are we going to do now? Maybe we can escape to the suburbs.

I said that his story seems oddly familiar, and I meant to our own personal experience. Here we are, on a Sunday morning, proceeding on our life's journey, and we stop by the church because it seems like a peaceful place. I am always thrilled to see you come through these doors each week, smiling, chatting, and preparing for our service time together. It warms my heart. But, truth be told, scratching the surface of any of us reveals a much more chaotic version of reality. I have heard it confidentially in the stories you tell, in the tone of your voices, and I can see it in your fatigued eyes. Beneath the cheerful surface, we each have our crosses to bear, our anxieties to confront. We wear them beneath our disguises and we bring them with us to church, even though we'd rather not. The disappointment and fears of these two companions 2000 years ago do, indeed, seem familiar. So, we gather here in this holy ark, proclaiming the resurrection and ringing our bells, but perhaps wondering if it can all be true, what the women experienced at the tomb, whether it's true, and whether it really can have impact in our personal and private lives.

Gathered in his name, we greet this worship experience with praise. Do we do it out of habit, or out of reverence, or because the Prayer Book tells us so? Or do we sense the presence of a compelling stranger, like the one who met the two travelers on the road to Emmaus? Maybe we don't yet recognize

him, but he fills the spaces between us with authenticity somehow. As we conclude our initial prayers, we sit and attentively listen to the scriptures being read for us. Like the stranger on the road, our lectors open the ancient scrolls for us, telling us about the prophecies, the events, and the mighty acts of God. And when we hear them, our hearts burn with the truth of God's dream. Sadly, we may not yet recognize the source of the readings, the Redeemer sent by God for us personally and corporately. Though he walks with us on our life's journey, we have not yet discerned his awesome identity. Could this truly be Jesus, and his Holy Spirit, which purport to save us by these words and sentiments? We thought that, as the descendant of King David, he would restore the historic dynasty, and the greatness of our people. We believed that he was a great prophet, telling God's truth everywhere he went. But now, we are cut to the heart, our world has been up-ended, and we doubt all that we once held as true. What can we trust? What can we believe? Whom should we follow, especially if it means diverting our self-important path? Yet the stranger insists on quoting scripture to us, chiding us and teasing us, as if he were our rabbi. For our short-sightedness. We have had those texts read to us from the ancient scrolls, but we've heard it all before, and from Jesus himself these last few years: the quotes from the Prophet Isaiah, for example, by which he often taught us about his supposed mission. Had Cleopas and the other followers been deceived? Would Jesus have had some reason to lie to them? Was he himself deluded by some kind of Messianic-complex? Their hearts burned while the stranger opened the scriptures for them, but they had not yet trusted the story the women told of an empty tomb and miraculous resurrection. Reminding them of the promises in the prophecies of scripture, which they now doubted, gave them heartburn.

Nonetheless, we have walked the seven miles, and are finally home. The stranger seems to want to continue on his way, but out of hospitality and a gut-feeling of affinity, we ask him to stay. It is getting late. We make our generous offering of hospitality, our offering from that with which we have been blessed. Do you begin to see the similarity, the pattern of our Sunday service? Praise, readings, offerings? And now, as the evening meal is set, the stranger, now a friend, unexpectedly assumes control of our liturgy: he takes, blesses, breaks, and gives the bread. This is the ancient formula of the anointed one. We have seen him do the same at the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, at countless meals with both the powerful and the marginalized. Take, bless, break, give. It is the mark of the servant-leader; it is the legacy of the shepherd who is also the sacrificial lamb; it is the paradox which is our salvation in this world and the next. We recognize the Christ in this action, and our gut tells us to believe. The scales fall from our eyes, and we see the real presence of Christ in that stranger in our midst, at our own table. The leader takes and blesses with authority, the servant breaks and gives lovingly to us. He is one and the same. Christ is both leader and servant. And in that moment, we recognize him, God with us. His love has broken forth among us. His sacrifice has won the victory. And we are redeemed and saved from the powers of darkness. All the teachings and demonstrations have come back to us, and Christ is risen in our hearts.

The pattern of redemption has been revealed to us, and how to use it faithfully. Take from what is at hand, even anxiety, fear, and chaos, and remake it to be a challenge to restore, resurrect, and renew. Bless it to be a miracle. And break it that it might be distributed to all. Give the love of Christ, give the love of fellowship, give the blessing and triumph of victory to all the world. The Romans may not yet be defeated...but they will be. Slavery may not yet be abolished...but it will be. Tyranny may not yet be overcome...but it will be. And it will depend on our receiving the vision of Christ, the rabbi, the savior, the Resurrected. Jesus disappears, but we, the church, are to take his place with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and we will champion God's lively and redeeming dream. In our story today, the two companions reverse their course, repent of their sorrow, overcome the fear and anxiety, and return to the center of the chaos to meet with the other followers of Jesus to courageously mark this change in direction. And that is exactly what we do here in this place each Eucharistic Sunday. Amen. Alleluia!