

April 30, 2017
The Third Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Dr. Lynda Tyson
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...?” (Lk. 24:32) Lord, take our minds and think through them; take our lips and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire.ⁱ
Amen.

What do we tend to do after a life-altering crisis? After the numbness starts to wear off, that is, what do we do after experiencing or witnessing something terrible, beyond imagination?

On the Friday after 9/11, I found myself unexpectedly in NYC's Port Authority Bus Terminal waiting out a several-hour layover as I tried to get home to Maine. You will remember that all the commercial aircraft were grounded. Remember, also, that 2001 was pre-smart phones and there were no tablets with apps. I was too exhausted to read. So, I passed the time people-watching in the world's busiest bus terminal.

The volume of Friday evening rush hour commuters was probably less than it had been on Monday, September 10th, yet there were plenty of people to watch. The vivid image that still stays with me is the NYC commuters doing exactly what they do at the end of every work day—rushing, checking their watches, looking up at the timetables showing destinations, platform numbers, and boarding status, with stern faces, not making eye contact or conversation. Out on the sidewalk there was still World Trade Center dust and ash in the cloudy air. But, inside Port Authority, most of the people I saw appeared to have gravitated back to doing what they were accustomed to doing every other “normal” weeknight commute.

In the aftermath of tragedy it is human nature to seek our regular routine—the familiar, the comfortable, even things we might not particularly enjoy—we just want reassurance that the nightmare is over and we can return (somehow) to the less threatening world we knew before whatever happened, happened. And, so it is with the followers of Jesus, post-crucifixion and post-resurrection.

My favorite story of shaken Jesus-followers seeking to recover their roots is found near the end of John's Gospel, where seven of the disciples make the seventy-plus-mile journey back home to Galilee a week or so after those Passover weekend events in Jerusalem. Peter leads them on an all-night fishing trip. They try to return to their familiar and comfortable pre-Jesus routine where they feel safe and out of the sight of Jerusalem's Roman and Temple officials who may decide they, too, need to die. We have another story of shaken Jesus-followers in today's passage from Luke, which happens the very evening of the Sunday the women discover the empty tomb.

This is the first we have heard of a Jesus-follower named Cleopas—probably one of the many just outside the inner circle of named disciples. Cleopas and his traveling companion have left Jerusalem for the village of Emmaus. Maybe they are headed home to the pre-Jesus lives they knew, leaving behind them in the dust the holy city and all the horror and confusion of the past three days.

Frederick Buechner, theologian, writer, and Presbyterian minister wrote this about Emmaus in his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*:

So, for at least some of the followers of Jesus, maybe the worst day was the third one, Sunday, which for the Jews was like our Monday, with everything around them returning so completely to normal that it was impossible to believe that either his life or his death was going to make any difference in the world at all. When they were suddenly afraid that the whole business of his life had not really added up to much...for at least two of the people who followed him, there was nothing left to do that Sunday but get out of town. And where did they go? They went to Emmaus. And where was Emmaus and why did they go there? It was no place particularly really, and, the only reason that they want there was that it was...distant from a situation that had become unbearable.ⁱⁱ

Modern scholarship expresses uncertainty when it comes to exactly where this village of Emmaus would have been. Perhaps, more important for us than a geographic location, is the Emmaus state of mind—a place of refuge. Buechner writes, all of us have gone to Emmaus at one time or another: “...to the movies just for the

sake of seeing a movie...Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday,” he writes, “...whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred...that even the noblest ideas...about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends...Emmaus...[was] where these two went to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life.”ⁱⁱⁱ Buechner is imagining their disappointment as the two men say to the stranger on the road, how they had hoped that Jesus of Nazareth, now dead, would be the one to redeem Israel.

Well, fortunately, for Cleopas and his companion, Jesus would not allow them to forget and certainly would not allow his life to be characterized as a failure. Fortunately, also, for the women who first meet the risen Jesus outside the empty tomb; fortunately, for the inner circle of disciples the risen Jesus visits more than once behind the locked door of the house in Jerusalem; fortunately, for those seven disciples who return from their over-night Galilean fishing trip to the surprise of risen Jesus on the Galilean beach; fortunately, indeed, for us and for everyone in the world who hears these resurrection appearance stories—those of us who do not see the risen Jesus with our eyes. Fortunately Jesus does not allow forgetting and certainly does not allow his life to be characterized as a failure. Cleopas and his companion were thinking rather narrowly. Redeem Israel? How about, redeem humanity; or, at least, all whose eyes will be opened and whose hearts will burn with the flame of his presence within?

Maybe, from time to time, you have noticed a vehicle parked right outside the church with a CT license plate that says “Luke 24.” You may already know that car and license plate belong to none other than our own priest and professor, Carolyn Sharp. After several years of seeing Carolyn’s car in the Divinity School parking lot and here on Cliff Street, last week I finally asked her for the back story about her “Luke 24” license plate. Carolyn told me that the Road to Emmaus story, and indeed all the stories of risen Jesus appearing, are profound and moving for her—hence, the license plate. There is a lot to be said for taking the Jesus story on the road with us, literally, everywhere we go. Since “Luke 24” is taken, maybe I will change my license plate to “John 21.” Then, every time someone might ask me the significance of “John 21” I would have an opportunity to tell them the risen Jesus on the beach story. Carolyn, we could start a license plate evangelism crusade! Maybe, you already have.

Luke tells us when Cleopas and his companion were approached on the road by an unrecognizable risen Jesus, “They stood still, looking sad.” Up until then, “They had been talking with each other about all [the] things that had happened to Jesus of Nazareth.” Look at the complete shift in their emotions and their energy after “their eyes [are] opened, and they [recognize] him.” Gloom and sadness turn into ecstatic revelation: “They [say] to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they...[return] to Jerusalem.” In the night, disappointment and fatigue forgotten, they go all the way back to the others, bursting to share their story. Emmaus becomes a whole different kind of refuge for Cleopas and his friend when the presence of Jesus is known in their hearts. Our Emmaus—yours and mine—that place to which we retreat to get away from the darkness around us—our Emmaus (wherever it is) can become a whole different kind of refuge—a true place of refuge—when we have with us the presence of the risen Jesus in our hearts.

In addition to meeting Jesus in the opening of scripture and the breaking of bread, the sacrament of Baptism is a way of receiving Christ’s presence and likewise being received into the Body of Christ, the church. In just a few moments we all will welcome young Connor as the newest member of the Body of Christ. With all the troubling goings-on in the world right now, let Connor’s Baptism be for Connor, for his family, and for all of us, a symbol of hope and comfort—a small oasis of “Emmaus” where we, along with Connor, might meet the risen Jesus. May our eyes be opened. May our hearts burn with the light of Christ’s presence.

Alleluia. Christ is Risen! **The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

ⁱ Attributed to Theodore Parker Ferris (1908 – 1972).

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966) 84-85.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*