

What Is Resurrection?

Luke 24: 13-35

You know what a parable is, don't you? It's a story based on a real-life situation. To find the meaning of a parable, you have to find yourself in the story. Jesus taught using parables. This was typical of a rabbi. There are many familiar parables in the Bible. There may also be parables about Jesus – stories created or adapted by the early church to teach others about the risen Christ. Scholar and author John Domenic Cross believes that the story about two disciples and their unexpected encounter with a stranger on the road to Emmaus is actually a parable about Jesus. This story teaches us how the first followers of the risen Christ understood resurrection and why it is important to us today.

Two people were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the same day some women found the tomb of Jesus empty. Crossan suggests that these two were a couple. Cleopas is named. He is clearly male. The other traveler is not named so likely was a woman. We can call her Mrs. Cleopas, Mrs. C.

The couple was walking along deep in conversation about Jesus. They were mourning the possibilities that were put to death with Jesus – the loss of dreams and of hope itself. As often happened in those days, a stranger came along and walked with them. We who are reading this story know the stranger is Jesus, but the couple does not recognize him. There is no flash of light, no angel messengers, no nail prints or spear wounds. There is no recognition of the risen Jesus who walked with them.

“So what are you guys talking about so intently?”

“Where have you been, stranger?” replied Cleopas. There is only one thing people are talking about these days.”

“What?”

“About what happened to Jesus.” Cleopas was incredulous and quickly recounted the story including how confused and disappointed they felt. “We thought he was the one.” Jesus, in his typically sensitive therapist-like way, answered: “You are so thick-headed and slow-hearted! Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said?” Then he started at beginning with the books of Moses and went through all prophets. There were so many who were killed for their faith. Later Cleopas and Mrs. C. realized how excited they had felt as he talked. “Our hearts were on fire!”

They reached Emmaus and the stranger seemed to be continuing on. The couple invited him to stay with them, to stay for dinner and spent the night. Jesus was going on and they had to invite him in. At dinner, Jesus took some bread and blessed. He broke it in a way that was reminiscent of the last supper and then served them. Suddenly they recognized Jesus and he was gone – vanished. The two didn't waste time trying to figure out where Jesus went. They set off immediately back to Jerusalem despite the hour. They went back to tell the other disciples their experience and how they recognized Jesus when he broke the bread.

What does this story tell us about Jesus? What does it say about the early church's experience and understanding of the risen Christ? The encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus teaches exactly the same as Jesus' own parables. We see Jesus in the face of those we embrace with hospitality – in the stranger with whom we share the food of God.

What are some lessons from this story? Scripture is a gateway to the path of following Jesus, but it is not enough. Jesus opened up the scriptures to the travelers, yet they still did not recognize him. Bible study begins to open up the door of recognition. Theological exploration can begin to turn on the lights, but if we stop there we won't recognize Jesus.

Jesus walked the road with the two disciples. They spent time with him and still did not recognize him. Practicing the presence of God helps establish a context for recognizing Jesus. Meditation, spiritual practice, fellowship, and community tunes our minds and hearts, but if we stop there, we won't recognize Jesus.

Like the two travelers, we need to invite Jesus in, even when we don't know it is Jesus. He stayed with them and broke bread with them. And then, there was a mystical moment, the realization that the food, hospitality, and community they were sharing with the stranger was not theirs but God's. Then, and only then, they recognized Jesus in the stranger and Jesus immediately vanished.

The temptation is to hold onto Jesus, to focus on him, but that is not the meaning of this story. That is not the opportunity God offers in Jesus. A number of years ago, I led a rap group for homeless men in a Washington, DC drop-in center. One day, the only ones in the group were two aggressive, young, and angry black men and one quiet, thin, and old black man – and me! It was a difficult conversation. The two young men were critical and hostile toward the old man. I was nervous. After about half an hour, there was a sudden though subtle change in the atmosphere. The old man was talking and the young men were interested. They listened quietly and then asked questions. They left the meeting very upbeat and I suddenly recognized Jesus in that old man. I never saw him again, though the two young men were regulars in the group for many months.

When we share food, hospitality, love, effort, all our resources, all our gifts – when we share our lives with the stranger, it is really God's stuff that we share. Knowing that it is God's life that we ultimately share with each other, then and only then we see Jesus.

Jesus is alive and walks among us. We see him in someone whose struggle suddenly becomes important to us. We see him when a stranger becomes a loved one. We recognize Jesus in those around us when we share openness, hospitality, and love. God's stuff that we share is food and also justice. It is clothing and peace. It is housing and love, friendship and equality. God's stuff is given to us in trust that we will share it well in Jesus' name.

We study the scriptures here at Crossroads Church. We do theological exploration and work hard to respect a variety of view points and interpretations. I will still tell you what I think and how I interpret the Bible, but I will never insist that you agree. We are enriched by the variety of

people, personalities, and perspectives here. We trust that God's Spirit is present and at work in each person.

We practice the presence of God here. Youth and adults meet regularly for times of spiritual practice. We gather in community for fun and also to conduct business. We value and offer hospitality. We work for justice and peace. We encourage people to follow God's call in their lives, to engage in work that leads to peace and justice.

Our congregation is engaged in a visioning process to decide how we will be church in the next year and beyond. Let's be sure that the vision toward which we strive leads us to share God's stuff with each other, with those in our midst who may be like strangers to us, and with those we don't now know. Let's be sure our vision leads us to shape ministries that bring peace, justice, and equity to people. Let us welcome the stranger and be a voice on behalf of the poor and oppressed in whose faces we will see Jesus. Let this vision lead us to choose to speak on behalf of racial equality, gender inclusiveness, economic equity, and civil and moral rights for those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. This is our opportunity to help shift the thinking of the world and to be the face of Jesus for others.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that human beings were created for eternity. The mystery of God is at the heart of each of us, yet we so often live out of touch with that mystery. We feel cut off from eternity and experience the cutoff as a sense of longing or emptiness. We try to ease the longing and fill the emptiness by accumulating things: money, security, friendships, and toys of all sizes and shapes. Nothing but God can ease that longing and fill that emptiness. Nothing but God can satisfy. We see God in the face of Jesus. God comes to be with us when we invite Jesus to stay.

As we look to the coming year, the coming week, and even the coming day, let us resolve to be church so that when people touch this community through our website, new coffee house, theater productions, neighborhood involvement, or here in Sunday School and worship, they will be fed with the food of God – with God's stuff. Let us be church to empower each other and those we touch to share the stuff of God with others. Let us be church so that each person we touch will discover the presence of God within themselves. Let us resolve – all of us – to be church together so that the eyes of the people we touch will be opened and they will see Jesus.