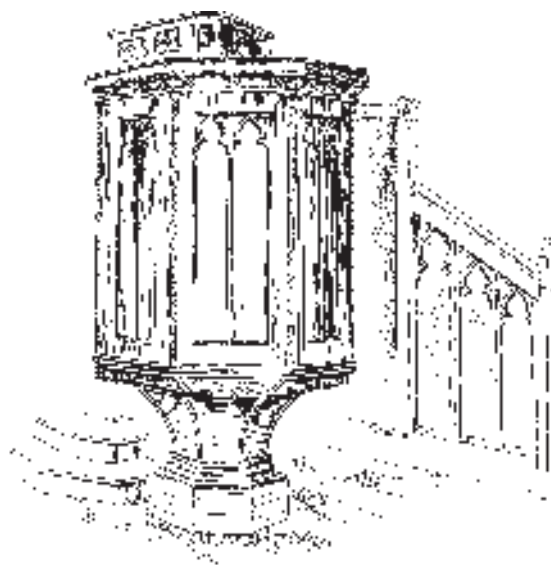


April 4, 2010
Easter

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

**Peacemaking:
The Believer's Calling
7. Peace Be With You**

By the Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Luke 24:13-36

“Peace be with you,” I didn’t hear those words of comfort from Jesus that first Easter day, neither did you. Come to think of it, I didn’t visit the empty tomb that first Easter morning. I didn’t talk with the gardener. I didn’t walk to Emmaus with Cleopas, neither did you. So my question this morning—nearly 2,000 Easters after the first one—is this: “How can we, those of us who have not seen the risen Lord, how can we come to know him? How can we experience for ourselves the presence of Christ, the peace of Christ?”

Let’s begin to answer that important question by looking at our Easter narrative again. Luke tells us that there’s been some heavy stuff going on. The disciples are overcome by the action-packed week they have just experienced. They are confused and fearful. Their leader has been murdered, and they have not acquitted themselves too nobly in the surrounding tumult. If that weren’t enough to cope with, now there are confusing rumors afoot that their executed leader has risen from the dead.

It’s all a little too much, so two of the disciples decide to take a hike to Emmaus, get out of town for a while and let things cool down. Suddenly the two are aware of footsteps. A stranger catches up to them

on the road, a stranger with a face like all faces. He is, of course, the risen Christ, the bright morning star of God's new day, but in the dimness of their discouragement, they cannot recognize him.

If we jump ahead to the end of the story, however, by the time they have reached Emmaus, their hearts are burning with faith and they are joyfully rushing back to Jerusalem singing the Easter hymn, "The Lord has risen indeed!" Easter has moved from a fearful ripple on the far side of hope, to an exciting reality.

What happened? How did the great and sweeping truth of Easter become real on the road to Emmaus? The crucial clue is found—as crucial clues often are—at the end of the story when they return to Jerusalem. "Then they told what had happened on the road," Luke narrates, "and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of bread." (Luke 24:35)

Easter is revealed on the road ... and in the breaking of bread. The first readers of Luke would have smiled at this reminder that Easter became real on the road, for they knew about the road. The "road" was a symbol for them of the whole Christian life, of the path of mission laid out before them. In fact, these early Christians were called, by friends and enemies alike, "the Way," in other words, they were nicknamed "people of the road." (See Acts 9:2.)

The risen Christ became alive to them on the road to Emmaus that first Easter. However, if we truly understand, the truth here is that the resurrection comes alive to us as the church travels down the "Way," down the road of mission, putting one foot in front of another as it walks every day along the way of obedience to the gospel. The risen Christ becomes real as we work for peace within our families, seek reconciliation in all of our relationships, visit those who are sick, comfort those who are distressed, welcome the stranger, teach the faith to our children, speak the good news to those who do not know it, whisper encouragement to those who doubt, provide food for the hungry, and do the thousands of everyday acts of obedience that make up the Christian life. It is here along *the road* that the risen Lord comes to meet us.

In his book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Robert Coles writes about Ginny, a young girl from a poor family who is bright, articulate, imaginative, and has a keenly developed spirituality. Ginny recounts, for example, that her uncle, who was wounded in Vietnam, is still nervous and upset, prone to frequent crying, and she wonders how God must have felt during the violence of that war. "If my uncle cries now," she reflects, "God must have cried, too. He must have wept. Don't you think?"

One day, Ginny was walking home and along the way encountered an elderly woman who seemed lost and confused. Ginny asked the woman if she needed help, and the woman, with relief, responded, "If you could, that would be wonderful." Ginny discovered that the woman had been walking to visit her daughter, but had gotten disoriented. She showed Ginny the written directions she had, and Ginny knew immediately where she had gotten lost and where she needed to go. Although Ginny was now late for her home chores, she sensed that getting this troubled stranger safely to her destination was the chore she most needed to be doing. So she traveled with her, talked gently to her, listened to her as the woman spoke of the pain in her life, and guided her to her daughter's house.

When they arrived and Ginny started to leave, the woman grasped her arm and announced that God had sent Ginny to her and that later she would pray a prayer of thanks to God for having Ginny there. The woman then gave Ginny a kiss.

On the way home, Ginny wondered - wondered what it would be like to be old, wondered if she were old and in need, if God would send some kid like her to help. "Maybe God puts you here," Ginny thought, "and ... gives you these hints of what's ahead, and you should pay attention to them, because that's Him speaking to you."

There on the "road," as a little girl helped a stranger in need, performing the chore she knew most needed to be done, the presence of God came alive.

But, it was not *just* "on the road" that the Emmaus event happened; it was also "in the breaking of bread." The first readers of Luke would have smiled at that, too, for they also knew about "the breaking of bread." This was their way of speaking of worship, especially the Lord's Supper. Indeed, as they read again and again this Emmaus Road story, they would have been amazed to see glimmers of their Sunday worship woven into the narrative: the creed (Luke 24:19-24), the sermon (Luke 24:27), and the Eucharist (Luke 24:30), are all there. When one knows how to look, one can see the Emmaus story as a narrative version of Luke's Sunday bulletin! In sum, Easter becomes alive in worship.

A woman spoke quietly of the death of her father. He had been a proud man, she said, a man who spent all his work days tilling the soil of a Pennsylvania farm and all his Sabbaths praising God for life and seed and family. A final bout with cancer sent him to the hospital never to come home again, and in the last week of his life the disease provided the added indignity of a stroke that robbed him of his speech. As his family visited his bedside, his eyes would moisten with frustration and grief as he tried in vain to speak to these people he loved so dearly. On his last day alive, the attending physician had issued the signal, the family had gathered in his room—the daughter and her two brothers. With strength fading, the father motioned to his son that he wanted a glass of water. The son hastened to the sink and returned with a full water glass, which he held toward his father's lips. But, the old man pushed the glass away and moved his finger from the glass toward his son, as if to say, "You drink it."

Hesitant and uncertain, the son lifted the glass to his lips and drank from it. Then the father motioned toward his daughter, indicating that she should drink some, too. Sensing what his father wanted, the son passed the glass to his sister, and she drank. Now the father, pointed toward the other son, and the daughter realized what was happening. "He is serving communion," she gasped.

There in the face of death, this father summoned a sacramental water glass to administer the feast of life. There in a wordless act of worship, the promise of the resurrection came home.

On the road and in the place of worship, the great parabola of grace touches the near edge of life, and the Easter message comes alive to us.

Well, that's the story of the walk to Emmaus. I imagine though, some of you are saying, "It is a wonderful story; but is it true?" I don't know if it is true in every detail. By the time Luke was writing his Gospel, belief in the resurrection of Jesus was already at the center of the Church's message. I do not hear Luke's story as a kind of newspaper account of yesterday's events. (Maybe you do, and that's fine.) I hear it as more of a summary of the experience of the early church: despair followed by encounters with Jesus leading to confidence that Jesus walks with us - *confidence that Jesus can be seen or experienced on the road and in worship*.

But, you persist, is the story true? It may be literally true. I certainly don't want to dispute it. I want to tell you. *It is true in the best way of all.* Not just in the sense of "Once upon a time." But, true in that it can be your story, here and now. That's what Easter is all about, you know. We didn't come here today

to commemorate the fact that 2000 years ago a few of his disciples met Jesus after he had died. We came here to celebrate the reality of the living Christ. We came to let Christ convert and renew *us* as he did them. "Jesus Christ is risen *today*," we sing.

What Georges Braque once said about art is also true of Easter: "The only thing that matters is the part that can't be explained." *How* it happens, I do not begin to know. *That* it happens, I have not the slightest doubt.

Let us pray:
Blessed Jesus, Risen Christ,
be with us
our morning guest,
our evening rest.
Give us eyes to see,
minds to know,
and hearts to receive
your undying love,
your unfailing strength,
this Easter day and forever more. Amen.