

# **Our Crucified Lord**

Luke 24

*Resurrection of the Lord/ 27<sup>th</sup> March 2005/ Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*

One of the most meaningful experiences of my life occurred one Easter evening more than twenty-five years ago. It took place in the chancel of the sanctuary in the church of my youth, the First Presbyterian Church of North Arlington, NJ. The sanctuary is cruciform in design, with a split chancel, meaning the lectern is on the left and the pulpit on the right. Behind them both is the organ console (on the left) and several pews for the choir (on the right). Between the organ and pews is a space for the communion table. The table is placed below a large, shiny, gold-plated cross. And above the cross and table is a sizable, round, stained-glass window of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, a copy of the famous painting "Christ at Gethsemane" by Johann Heinrich Hofmann (1824-1911). It was the focal point of the sanctuary. My youth group was meeting that evening and our youth director, Mary Sample (who was a seminarian from Princeton)<sup>1</sup> brought us into the sanctuary for a service. We sat in the choir pews in the chancel, with the table, cross, and stained-glass window to my right. Mary stood in front of us, opened her Bible and read to us from Luke 24, the encounter with the Risen Christ on the Emmaus Road.

On Easter Sundays we tend to hear the resurrection accounts from Easter morning, such as the women arriving to an empty tomb. Only John tells us that Mary actually met Jesus at the tomb; Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us the women encountered angels, Peter at first found only absence, an empty tomb.

According to Luke, the first encounter with the Risen Christ takes place on Easter evening. Two people are walking along the road to Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, deep in thought and conversation. They are perplexed and troubled. We only know the name of one, Cleopas (who appears for the first time in Luke's narrative – we're

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<sup>1</sup> Today, Rev. Mary E. Sample is Executive Presbyter of Lake Michigan Presbytery.

not sure who he is). The other one has no name; he could have any name – maybe your name? It could have been there or anywhere. It was that evening or any evening, maybe this evening. Then and now, now or then, past or present, present or past – the way the story is told it’s almost timeless. All the years separating us seem to melt away and there we are, on that road pervaded by a deep sadness. We know what happened, we were witnesses and we did nothing. Disciples of Jesus know what happened.

But then, Luke tells us in the midst of their confusion and grief – our confusion and grief (?) – Jesus joins them on the road and walks with them. They don’t recognize him – *would you?* They weren’t expecting him. Their presuppositions limited their ability to see (not unlike us). Jesus walks among them *incognito*. They know someone’s there, a stranger, but they don’t know who he is, they can’t perceive, they cannot see him – not yet, they’re not ready. I’m not sure why; maybe sometimes God keeps us in the dark, graciously preventing us from seeing until we’re able to handle the truth about God. What these disciples are about to experience is going to rock their world, what they are about to encounter will completely dismantle everything they thought true and possible about themselves, the world, and even God. Who is ever ready for such an encounter? How does one get ready? Is one ever really ready? The resurrection is the kind of truth Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) had in mind when she wrote: “Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind.”<sup>2</sup>

The stranger begins with a simple question – *what are you talking about?* You can tell the disciples are at the breaking point because they snap back at him and say, “Are you the only who doesn’t know what happened in Jerusalem in Friday? Where have you been? Have you been in a cave?” To which Jesus might have replied, “Well, actually...yes.” He didn’t say that, of course.

Instead, he provides a context for their questions and pastorally, graciously, tenderly leads them deep into scripture. Going through scripture, talking about the Messiah, their hearts start to burn within them;

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in John Buchanan’s editorial, *The Christian Century*, March 22, 2005.

setting their grief aside or maybe in their grief they begin to talk about ultimate things, things that really matter, engaged with the stuff of life, talking with the walking-dead-come-to-life about life itself because he is Life (John 14)! Their hearts were burning within them. Wouldn't yours?

Yet, they still didn't get it, but they didn't want him to leave. So they invited him to stay with them, they urged him to stay and he stays. It came time to eat. At the table he took a loaf of bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Not long ago they saw someone who took a loaf of bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. Not long ago they witnessed someone who was blessed, someone who was broken by people who could not tolerate the blessings of God, who gave his life so that people would *get it*, would really know Yahweh. It is then at that point they get it, their eyes see him, and they *recognize* him. It took the breaking of the bread to make him known. Then he vanished.

The disciples run back to Jerusalem, risking their lives by traveling in the dark. It was dangerous to travel at night, but they had to go. I guess one has nothing to fear after encountering resurrection. After experiencing the dead come to life, what else is there to fear? For darkness is as light when the darkness is filled with the presence of the Crucified Lord.

This text has stayed with me all these years and it continues to grow in meaning. I often read it devotionally on Easter evening and remember. What struck then and gives me hope now is this Easter claim upon my life: *that we will meet the Risen Lord on the road of our lives*. Hearing about that evening encounter on the way to Emmaus on another Easter evening seemed to say then and now, that an encounter with the Risen Lord is possible. That becomes the foundation for the Christian life. He met me there that evening and many other times. Slowly, over time he has gradually, graciously dazzled me – when I was ready – opened my eyes and my heart and my mind to recognize him more and more in this world – usually at the *breaking points*.

I share none of this with you in order to boast, for this is not about me – but about God. It was given to me so that I can share it with you. I tell the story in order to give witness to what I have come to know, so that

others might come to know what is the height and depth and length of God's grace in Jesus Christ, which is the point of Luke's gospel, that we become *witnesses*. When the disciples recognized Jesus, they immediately went back to Jerusalem to tell the others how he had been known to them in the breaking of the bread. But they couldn't get their words out fast enough because the others were eager to tell them first, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"

Testimony. Go and tell. Witness. All things Presbyterians are not good at – or so we tell ourselves. But if we are silent, then how will people know? That's how the truth of the gospel is spread. That's how people know God's truth – not through arguments, reasoned debate, proofs and facts.<sup>3</sup> When we tell our stories about how the Crucified Lord has met us and appeared to us, has loved us and changed our lives, we hold out the hope for others that God will meet them, too. When we meet the Crucified Lord we will be changed. "To encounter a God in whose heart is a cross" how can we not be changed?<sup>4</sup>

But where do we encounter this God in whose heart is a cross? There are many places, people, and circumstances where we meet the Crucified Lord – sometimes in the church and sometimes outside it. Emmaus can be any place. But even there, Jesus uses the occasion of a simple meal to show us that "God gives himself to us in an intensified way in this sacrament,"<sup>5</sup> the table is a place of encounter with the Crucified Lord – not the only place, but a significant one in that it focuses us to see in this meal: *the blessing, the breaking, the giving*. This is the sum of Jesus' life, just as the cross focuses and summarized the entirety of Jesus' ministry – it's all about *the blessing, the breaking, the giving*. We discover that this cruciform pattern and shape is the heart of the Christian life; this is how we witness the presence of the Crucified Lord in the midst of a world that still waits to be redeemed.

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), "Testimony, not the eternity of ideas, is the mode by which this truth [of Christ] is declared, is its true modality." (p. 260.)

<sup>4</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Fiddes, p. 161.

In his journal written in the trenches of the First World War, G. A. Studdert-Kennedy (1883-1929) tells just how difficult it was to witness to the Crucified One in the midst of pain and death, destruction and grief. The circumstances have changed since then, but we still have our trenches and the world still waits to be redeemed. On this Easter we can take comfort in his words; he wrote, "Broken bread and wine outpoured, quite simple things, what do they mean? Is it not plain in the light of the Cross. The Sacrament is just the continual representing of the Cross. Coming to the Sacrament is coming to the Cross, and coming to the Cross is coming to God, the only God, Whose body is for ever broken and Whose blood is ever shed, until the task of creative redemption shall at last be all complete. The Cross is not really past, but present, ever present, and the Sacrament is the means of making His presence real to ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

So come to the table, encounter the Crucified Lord. May his truth dazzle us – gradually, so that our eyes may open and know him in the breaking.

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Anketell Studdert-Kennedy, *The Hardest Part* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918), pp. 128-129.