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Acts 2: 14a, 36 – 41

1 Peter 1: 17 – 23

Psalm 116: 1 – 3, 10 – 17

Luke 24: 13 – 35

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John and Charles Wesley were two of nineteen children born to Samuel and Susannah Wesley. While different in temperament, both brothers followed much the same path in life. Six years apart – John in 1720 and Charles in 1726 - they both enrolled in Christ Church, one of Oxford’s largest colleges. Like their father, both brothers were ordained as Anglican clergy. While still at Oxford, Charles and some friends formed a religious club in which they covenanted with one another to practice various spiritual disciplines – Bible study, prayer, fasting and charitable works. When someone derisively called Charles a ‘methodist’ because of his rather methodical approach to his life of faith, Charles decided to claim it as an honor instead of an insult. John, though no longer a student, also joined the club.

In 1735, the Wesleys came to Georgia with General Oglethorpe on his second trip. Despite their serious and rigorous approach to their spiritual lives and their missionary work in the colony, neither John or Charles really felt, deep down, that they were children of God simply by grace. They returned to England, believing that they were failures both in their faith and in their lives. John did not have the faith to continue preaching. He famously wrote about his experience in Georgia, “I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh, who shall convert me?”

On the ship back to England, John and Charles fell in with a group of Moravians. The Moravians talked to the brothers about their deep belief in salvation by grace, through faith in Christ. Regarding his seeming inability to preach, Peter Bohler, one of the Moravians gave John the advice to “fake it ‘til you make it,” or, a little more eloquently, “Preach faith until you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith.”

Not long after arriving in England, the brothers had experiences that forever changed their understanding of - and relationship with - God. Charles was the first. On Pentecost Sunday, Charles journaled that the “Spirit of God ‘chased away the darkness of my unbelief.’” He would go on to write a hymn to commemorate this day of his salvation as he saw it. Three days later, his brother, John, attended a prayer meeting in London. He was still desperately seeking some sort of assurance for his faith. Afterwards, John wrote, “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.” As soon as he could, John shared the Good News with his brother, Charles.

John Wesley, who feels his heart ‘strangely warmed’ within him while hearing Scripture explicated. The two, startled people who turn to one another and say, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening up the Scriptures to us?” It is hard not to see the similarities in these two experiences.

The Road to Emmaus is one of the best-known stories in the Gospels. It is the story of two ordinary people – two people who are followers of Jesus, but not in the ‘inner circle’ – meeting Jesus as the risen Lord and not knowing it. Well, at least not knowing it until the last minute, when in one breath they recognize Jesus and in the next breath he is gone. It is the story of people’s lives being transformed by faith in Jesus, the Christ. Just like John and Charles Wesley.

These two people are walking along the road. It is the evening on the day of the resurrection, and they are headed home to a small village about seven miles, or a couple hours walk, outside of Jerusalem. One of them is named Cleopas. Many scholars think that the other person might well be his wife, who may also be “Mary, the wife of Clopas” who is mentioned by the evangelist, John, as one of the women at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. The two know the events of the morning, how Mary of Magdala and the other women went to the tomb and found it empty, a fact which was then verified by others in the group. But, in Luke’s Gospel, though the women reported encountering angels, no one had yet seen Jesus’ body, either dead or resurrected.

With no particular reason to hang around Jerusalem any longer, the two have started the trek home. They have lost, or perhaps nearly so, their faith and their hope. It is clear, though, that the idea, the mere possibility, of resurrection appeals to them. They have been deeply engrossed in conversation with one another the whole way from the city, hashing and rehashing the details of the day, trying to figure out what to make of it. They have been devoted followers of Jesus. But, like the Wesleys, they are in need of some assurance that their faith has not been in vain. Beneath the surface of their confusion and grief, there is a deep hunger, a spiritual yearning for their hope in Jesus to be affirmed, for God to be somehow alive and present with them. They are worn down by the world, and allowing their uncertainties and practicalities to inhibit their faith, so they fail to recognize Jesus when he walks right up to them. They yearn for the presence of the living God, but are too anxious, too skeptical to actually recognize Jesus.

Jesus does join them, though. He asks the couple why they are so upset, and they, in turn, ask incredulously if he is the only one who doesn’t know the goings on in Jerusalem. Jesus asks them to spell it out. The two then proceed to tell the whole story without the slightest idea that he is the subject of their discourse. They end with the rather suspect news of the resurrection. For them, and for their faith, it seems to be the end of the road. They are headed home to resume their lives where they were.

Like a bucket of cold water or a slap on the face, Jesus, never one to mince words, says (in effect), “You fools! Get out of yourselves! It’s not about *your* grief or dashed hopes. It’s not about *you*! It’s about the cosmos and everything in it.” So then it is *Jesus’* turn to enlighten the *couple*. The conversation, enlivened greatly by Jesus’ presence and his illumination of one passage of scripture after another, goes on until the three reach the village. Amy Hunter, writing in *The Christian Century* magazine [3.27.02], says, “It is an image of God walking alongside human confusion, human pain and a human loss of faith and hope.”

Jesus has begun to satisfy their hunger, and now, the couple offers to satisfy his. They invite Jesus to stay the night with them. Amy Hunter likewise notes that the Emmaus story invites us to expect God to find us, but it also challenges us to see that it isn’t our unshakable faith or deep spirituality that connects us with Christ, it is our smallest gestures of hospitality and friendship.

It is at table with him then, as Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives the bread, that the disciples’ hearts and minds are finally opened fully. In the very moment of recognition, however, Jesus is suddenly gone. Just when it all comes together and makes sense, poof, Jesus is, once again, absent. As one writer puts it, “[we] can’t nail God down to a dining table and the breaking of bread any more than [we] can nail God down to a cross with real nails.” [Edmund A. Steimle, *The Lutheran*, 1983] God will not fit into our notions of how God should or should not act. And though we experience God burning in our hearts, or strangely warming them, we cannot hold God captive there.

We are not so unlike the Wesley brothers or the couple on the road to Emmaus. We come here on Sundays, weighed down by our concerns, our cynicism, the stressors in our lives. We are educated people, products of our environment and our post-Enlightenment, post-Christian age. We live in a world of numbers and data and money and power, and we wonder – what do they have to do with mystery and meaning and relationship and life and the cosmos? We, too, are preoccupied and skeptical. We, like the Wesleys and the couple, wonder if we are not failures in our faith and in our lives. We, too, yearn for an affirming experience of God: one that will shore up our faith; one that will somehow substantiate our hope; one that will not disappoint. We are eager to discuss and debate the *idea* of God, but are we prepared to experience, or even recognize, the reality of God walking along beside us at any given moment?

The Good News of Emmaus is that God does indeed walk with us, whether we know it or not. And that God remains faithful to us, whether we return the favor or not. And that God is able to use us, not just in our nano-seconds of grace and righteousness, but in those long spans of willfulness and failing faith. In the end, the only way we can make sense of the Truth of Easter is to encounter the risen Christ ourselves, to have our eyes (and our hearts) opened so that we can recognize Christ in our midst. The miracle of Emmaus happens when we orient ourselves Christ-ward with the openness, the receptivity, of a child.

Sunday after Sunday, we meet together, just as Christians have now done for 2,000 years. On the first day of the week. On the day of the resurrection. Just like the couple on the road to Emmaus, Sundays are the day for Scriptures to be opened to us and for a meal to be shared. All so that we may come to know the risen Christ. We are each invited to experience the same burning, the same strange warming, of our hearts upon hearing the Word of God. We are each invited to experience the same opened eyes at the breaking of the bread. The Risen One is indeed present with us today. Here. Now. Alleluia! +