

From the Pulpit
Salem First Presbyterian Church

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Luke 24:13-31

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First Presbyterian Church, Salem, Oregon
April 6, 2008 (1920's style service)

In choosing the music for this 1920's service, we've included the hymn, "In the Garden," a popular hymn of that time. It brings to mind the story of the little girl who told her parents quite confidently that she knew the name of God, and he was called Andy. She got the idea from the hymn, "And...he walks with me and...he talks with me, and...he tells me I am his own."

This morning as we recall the early years of the church's life, we hear echoes of the journey our church has taken in recent years, with music an integral part the church, and the need to **hold fast to God's faithfulness in times of transition and change**. As the hymn promises, God does indeed walk with us along the way.

Our Scripture reading from Luke's gospel is the journey taken by Christ's disciples as they walked the road to Emmaus. They had journeyed with Jesus as he healed and taught. Now he was gone, and they were returning home. They had hoped things might be different.

They had hoped...to speak of "**hope in the past tense**" is a sad thing. On the road to Emmaus, they were walking the road each of us walks at some time in our life. "It is the road you walk when [your candidate has lost, when you've been laid off at work] when your loved one has died--the long road back to the empty house, the stacks of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again.¹

As the disciples went along, recalling the last week of Jesus' life, a stranger joins them on the road, and asks what they are talking about. They wonder if he's been living under a rock--how could he not know what has been happening? So they tell about Jesus, and the crucifixion, and how the women came back from the tomb with a vision of Jesus alive again.

The unrecognised stranger (who is Jesus himself) responds, "Wasn't it necessary for the Messiah to suffer and then enter his glory?" He was saying to them in effect, if you had read your Bible, you would have picked up the prophecies about the **suffering servant**, how he would **bear your griefs and carry your sorrows**.

But despite his words, despite their having spent every waking hour with Jesus for several years, the two walking along the road still don't realise it is Jesus there beside them. Sometimes it's that way for us, when we feel alone, or don't see past the burdens we're carrying. We don't realize that **there at our side is a God who himself bears the scars** of having lived a human life.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Blessed Brokenness" in *Gospel Medicine*, pp. 20-1

The disciples don't recognise Jesus, but they show the stranger the renowned hospitality of the Middle East, inviting him to stay with them. Only when he sat at table with them, and broke bread, did they realise it was the Lord. He took bread, and blest and broke it as he had in the upper room.

The story of the Emmaus road has much to tell us about discipleship, about living as Christians along the road of our everyday lives. One thing it tells us is that an essential component of following Christ is to **share his story** with those we meet.

The disciples told something of Jesus' story to the stranger along the road. As we walk through our lives, we have many times when we have a chance to **give account for the hope within us**. This week, the poet laureate Maya Angelou was interviewed on her 80th birthday. At the end of the interview, she added this, "I live life as a person of faith...I believe there is nowhere where God is not." (NPR, April 6, 2008) Like the disciples, and like this poet, in the course of our days, we have a chance to tell something of Jesus' story.

If you read closely, you note that the disciples didn't do evangelism all that well, really, which is kind of comforting to those who don't find evangelism an easy thing. They only told a part of Jesus' story, and left the ending open, sharing how some of the women had amazed them with their tale of the empty tomb. Maybe in the end theirs is a useful example, since they left the door open for further questions. In that sense, Scriptural **evangelism is invitational, not exhaustive; it leaves room for God's Spirit to work**.

We Presbyterians are not particularly known for evangelism, at least not in the soapbox kind of way. Yet we are called, with all those who follow Christ, to **find a way to tell Jesus' story to the next generation, so that faith may be handed on**, and to those who are outside the fold, that they may find their way in. This may mean talking with a friend when we go walking or fishing, or teaching children in Sunday school, or mentoring a student; but we are called in some fashion to go and make disciples.

And we are called to do this as a church. There might be classes in parenting or marriage enrichment that we could offer to give people a faith perspective on the challenges of daily life, to bring Christ into the picture.

Another thing we see in the Emmaus road story is the essential value of **hospitality**. The Bible says we should show hospitality to strangers, for some have thereby entertained angels unawares. Here, the disciples invite in a stranger, who ends up being the Lord himself.

One thing people appreciate about our congregation is its warm welcome. On the bulletin cover from the 1920's, we find a reminder this has long been true, seeing the motto, a **"church with a warm welcome and a purpose to serve."** (Not a bad mission statement)! Next week, we will have a chance as a church to extend a welcome to our guests from the Interfaith Hospitality Network, as part of serving and helping homeless families find a foothold toward long-term housing.

The disciples invited Jesus into their home. Another thing this implies for us is that **really taking the faith to heart** means going beyond simply coming to church. As the disciples did on the road to Emmaus, we can **invite Christ into our heart, into our home**.

The story of the Emmaus road gives another crucial component of our life as disciples. Jesus **interprets the Scripture** to them, applying it to the events of the day. To have a faith that keeps growing and doesn't go stagnant, we need to find some place where we can reflect on Scripture for our lives, and this church offers a place to do that through a variety of adult classes. You may have noticed the current class on heaven, for which there is a sign on the door that says, Heaven, the door is open, come in any time.

As followers of Christ, we're not to be content with our faith where it is, but to struggle and to act on what it means to be a person of faith in this time, just as those who went before us responded to the needs of their day. In the 1920's, the church faced the need to be faithful and constant through economic boom times, and to keep the faith when the market bubble burst and times were hard. All that sounds not so unlike our own day, when **we are called to keep the faith in a time of economic uncertainty**.

Along with the need for telling Christ's story, and hospitality, and the interpretation of faith, there is one more thing the Emmaus road story suggests for us to become deeper disciples. We need to come to Christ's table, where he offers **bread for the journey**. The life of service to which he calls all of us is challenging, and we can't survive on our own strength, or we will find ourselves weary. In the Lord's supper, he gives us his own body broken for us on the cross, to sustain us in our calling as disciples.

The good news of the Emmaus road is that we are not alone; there is **One** at our side who walks the road with us, **who if we invite him in to our hearts and homes, will be known to us in the breaking of bread**.

So as we draw near to his table, we end in prayer to invite our Lord more deeply into our heart and into this, his church.

Let us pray:

As we remember your faithfulness to your people here in this your church over so many years, Lord, we thank you for all those who have found you here. Today we would add our hearts to theirs, remembering the words they would have sung as our own prayer,

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.

In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

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