

**Sermon “Hearts Burning Within Us”**

**Sunday, May 7, 2011**

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**Christ Church, Shaker Heights, OH**

**Easter 3 Year A: Luke 24:13-35**

*[Pick up GPS unit]*

Let's see, “Navigation.”

Oh, a Warning. “Do not enter data or work the software controls while operating a vehicle.” Sure, okay. After all, I would never talk on my cell phone while driving, it's way too dangerous, so why would I program my GPS while driving. Press, I Agree. Ah, there it is, Menu. Then Destination. Address. City First. Type in the name of the town. E-M-M-A-U-S. Hit OK. Oh, what's that, there's no Emmaus listed. Hmmmm, must be too small a place to be picked up on the GPS.

Well, the Biblical text says Emmaus was seven miles from Jerusalem. Let's see if that works. I can always ask for directions to Emmaus at some gas station in the Holy City. J-E-R-U-S-A-L-E-M. Yes! There's Jerusalem. Press OK. What? No, not Jerusalem, Ohio! Jerusalem, Israel. Oh, great this GPS only finds locations in the USA and Canada. How I am going to get on the road to Emmaus so that I can encounter Jesus if my GPS can't get me there?

That's how it happens, right? I mean meeting Jesus and believing in the resurrection. It has to be exactly like it was in the story from Luke's Gospel. You have got to duplicate the same circumstances, be in the same environment, in order for it to be real. It's just like a scientific experiment; we need a methodical procedure carried out with the goal of verifying, falsifying, or establishing the accuracy of the resurrection. So if I can get on the road to Emmaus, I can see if Jesus meets me there just like he did with Cleopas and his companion. Plus it would be really cool to watch him vanish from my sight. Poof; now you see him, now you don't. If this doesn't happen for me, if it's not scientifically repeatable, how can I possibly ever believe in the resurrection?

A lot of Christians—especially we Episcopalians—are skeptical about these passages of scripture that speak of paranormal appearances of Jesus. That stuff isn't real, we think. We are too smart, savvy and sophisticated to believe in that silly stuff. If we are not provided with concrete evidence, seen with our own eyes, then it can't be true. Yet the reality is the Biblical texts about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ are all paranormal experiences that are meant to inspire our faith and not cause us to disbelieve.

Mary Magdalene encounters a man who suddenly appears by her at the empty tomb. She believes he is a gardener. It is only when the man speaks her name that she recognizes him as the risen Jesus.

The terrified disciples are secreted away in a locked room when the risen Jesus suddenly appears in their midst. It is only when the doubting Thomas insists on hard evidence and sees the marks of crucifixion on Jesus' body that he believes.

On the Road to Emmaus we have two followers of Jesus heading out of Jerusalem. It is the Sunday of the resurrection. News that the women visiting the tomb have encountered the risen Jesus is spreading like wildfire. As these two walk the dusty road, a man suddenly appears to them. The text tells us that, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” This is similar to Mary’s experience in the garden. This mystery man walks alongside the two men as they relay the events of the past few days concerning Jesus; events which they have yet to make any sense of. Jesus admonishes them for their obtuseness and he begins to open up the scripture for them, interpreting these events.

As they approach Emmaus the two men encourage Jesus to stay with them and have dinner. He accepts their invitation. As Jesus was at table with them he takes bread, blesses, breaks and gives it to them. The active verbs of taking, blessing, breaking and giving are Eucharistic. It is in the context of these actions that the men’s eyes are opened and they recognize the risen Jesus, clearly indicating that they were present at the last supper just a few nights prior.

Jesus then “vanished from their sight.”

Astonished, the two men begin to connect the dots. Oh course this was Jesus. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” they ask. And despite the late hour they jump up and rush back to Jerusalem to share their encounter of Jesus with the disciples.

The road to Emmaus resurrection story, as well as the one’s with Mary Magdalene in the garden and Thomas and the disciples hiding in the upper room, provide us with a boilerplate truth about our Christian faith; a truth that strikes at the head and heart dichotomy that splits Christians and how we engage our faith . . . or not.

The central question the resurrection stories ask us is, “How do we encounter the risen Jesus in our lives? Is it through deductive reasoning, scientific evidence and our intellect, or in the experiences of our heart?” And if we believe it is the former and then our minds can’t rationally process the resurrection stories and the presence of the risen Jesus, do we then not believe? How much of this is because we fear the experience of our hearts, thinking that’s too emotional, too irrational?

With Mary and the two followers on the road to Emmaus the evidence is clearly in favor of the relying on the heart experience.

Mary does not know she is encountering Jesus until he utters her name. The presence of the man in the garden did not compute in her mind, which told her that a gardener was standing in front of her. Mary’s mind was struggling to make sense of this impossible situation of the body being gone. It is only when Jesus intimately speaks her name that her heart responds with a leap as it remembers Jesus and his voice.

The same is true of Cleopas and his companion. They do not intellectually compute the presence of Jesus walking with them on the dusty road. Their minds are in over-drive trying to figure out what this bizarre story of a man come back from the dead all means. It is only when they hear Jesus’ voice blessing and giving them the bread that they realize, “Oh my gosh, it’s him!” The text is clear in telling us the men’s response when they recognize the risen Jesus; they say to one another, “ Were not our hearts burning within in us while he was talking to us on the road?”

They knew the risen Jesus in their hearts.

What clinches the argument of the heart being the conduit of our knowing the risen Jesus is the Lord's comment to Thomas in the locked upper room after he touches Jesus' wounds and professes his faith. Jesus' responds to Thomas saying, "Have you believed me because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

Just like my GPS will not lead me to Emmaus and a real time encounter with Jesus, so will my mind by itself never ultimately lead me to an encounter with the risen Jesus either. Our highly educated, rational minds will always be skeptical of the irrational heart centered experiences of the resurrection.

We need to trust more in our hearts and not rely so much on our heads when it comes to our faith life. While study and intellect are valuable components, the bottom line is our faith cannot be built solely on an academic, intellectual or scientific enterprise. Scripture is clear that the human heart is where God desires to meet us.

Our lives become our road to Emmaus where we can encounter the risen Jesus. This is a road you and I travel on every day and its portal is through our hearts. To be a pilgrim on that road is to open your heart to experiences that are simply beyond our rational experience. Jesus is clearly present in the hearing of the word and the breaking of the bread. But Jesus is equally present to us in the rest of life as well. Like our eyes we need to have our hearts open so we know the presence of the risen Jesus as he journeys with us as companion on the way.

Emmaus reminds us that it isn't our intellects and great powers of rational thought that ultimately matter, it is understanding that our risen Savior seeks us out, is with us walking along side us in our human confusion, fear, pain and loss and also in our joy. Emmaus is about being aware of our hearts burning within us as they recognize the love of Jesus with us.

Amen.