

Deuteronomy 18: 15-18  
Psalm 116  
Luke 24: 13-35

What Happens on the Road  
May 4, 2014  
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I always have my ears open for the words that seem to open up the world. You learn the most wonderful facts and hear the most wonderful poetry on the Writer's Almanac on NPR. In Garrison Keillor's mellifluous voice, we hear whose birthday it is. Last Monday, we heard about Alice Waters. She was 27 years old with no restaurant experience when she opened Chez Panisse, a Berkeley restaurant centered on fresh, local ingredients. She wanted to create food like that she had experienced in France, where friends sat down together for long meals prepared by generous hosts. But at first she was a little too generous — in the first year of its operation, Chez Panisse gave away \$30,000 worth of wine to guests and staff. Foolish and generous. She wrote: "Our full humanity is contingent on our hospitality; we can be complete only when we are giving something away; when we sit at the table and pass the peas to the person next to us we see that person in a whole new way." Something tells me that she should be writing sermons.

This is the third Sunday of the Easter season, when we tell a lot of resurrection stories. And there are a lot of them. The empty tomb, Mary Magdalene in the garden, Thomas and the disciples in a locked room, Peter and John fishing on a Lake in Galilee. Many of them share this feature: the risen Christ is not easy to recognize. Is that a gardener? Who is that on the shore? And who is this stranger on the road leaving Jerusalem? Resurrection is not easy to recognize and comprehend. I once heard someone say that they did not know anyone who started their Christian journey by accepting the idea of resurrection first. Where do we start? With what we know, and what we can experience.

There are two things we can **know** about Jesus, from the tradition, and from our knowledge of his place and time: Jesus did a lot of walking, and he did a lot of eating. Walking back and forth in Galilee, from village to village, walking into the desert, walking to Jerusalem. And Jesus seemed to love sitting down to eat — so much so that religious people called him a glutton. He loved it when other people ate, feeding thousands by the lakeside, sitting down to dinner with sinners like Levi and Zaccheus, with Pharisees like Simon. He spoke in parables about where to sit at feasts and who to invite. And his last act of friendship, just before his arrest, was to break bread and share wine with the disciples. Jesus clearly placed tremendous importance on the sharing of meals, and the insightful conversations which happened over the food.

So, knowing just this much about Jesus, we can begin to put ourselves in the position of two people walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that first Easter afternoon. They were talking, as companions do on the road, processing what had happened over the last few days. They are joined by Jesus, walking along, whom they call "stranger." In response to his question, they give a synopsis of the Gospel story: their prophet, Jesus of Nazareth was arrested and executed, and now some women were saying that he was still alive. We can imagine the mixture of grief, skepticism and wonder with which they told their story. Instead of revealing himself, the stranger is a little harsh in his reaction: "Oh, how foolish you are!" Don't you understand what's in the Scriptures? And he explains about what a Messiah is, and who it is they have been waiting for.

Instead of being offended at all this, they find the stranger's conversation compelling enough to invite him to have supper with them. There is a transformation. The stranger becomes a companion – from the Latin *com panis*, “with bread.” Then the guest becomes a host, taking, blessing, breaking and sharing the bread. That gesture, the giving of bread, allowed Cleopas and his friend to see the stranger-companion in a new light. Then it allowed them to understand what had happened earlier, when his speaking had such resonance.

That stranger took the skepticism and the curiosity and the longing of the disciples on the road to Emmaus and wove them into the fabric of scripture. They had always been taught a tradition of waiting for rescue, waiting for that prophet promised by Moses, waiting for Elijah to return, waiting for a new king, waiting for rescue from the Romans. What was the fire that was lit in their hearts? Once the intimacy of breaking bread opened their eyes, they realized that they did not need to wait for rescue anymore. They recognized the stranger, even though he did not remain physically present. They realized that Christ would never be absent, because there would always be companions and strangers with whom to share the Scriptures and break the bread.

Today's Gospel story resonates as a picture of human community and of the power of words and rituals to connect us with the presence of God. Particularly moving is its image of the crucified one who walks with us in our human confusion, human pain and a human loss of faith and hope. Emmaus invites us to expect God to find us. Emmaus challenges us to see that it isn't our unshakable faith and deep spirituality that connect us with the risen Christ, but our smallest gestures of hospitality and friendship.

Earlier I mentioned the person who doubted that anyone started their Christian journey by accepting the idea of a literal resurrection first. Then, where do we start? With metaphors of butterflies and Spring? They might be helpful on some level. For most of us this trust and belief comes slowly as we spend time in each other's company, opening the scriptures together, sharing meals, listening to each other's troubles and tragedies. It comes as we experience what Alice Waters describes: that our full humanity is contingent on our hospitality; that we are complete only when we are giving something away; when we sit at the table and pass the peas (or the bread) to the person next to us and we see that person in a whole new way. Slowly we get a sense of this immense Love, this holiness that is not contained by four walls or by tombs, this puzzling and compelling story of a life given for the sake of the future. Slowly we begin to trust the promises that were given to the ancient Hebrews and to the disciples in Jerusalem. Slowly, and sometimes only in retrospect, we can watch those promises unfold.

I want to share with you part of the text of a song that was written by a man on the isle of Iona. His name is Brian Woodcock, and he was warden of the Abbey there for a few years. He saw many people come and go, had many encounters with pilgrims, walked many miles with them, and shared bread with them. And he reflected in verse on the mystery of our story from Luke. He wrote, and sang:

*He was nothing to us but a name, and we thought our road would never find him.  
He was with us all the while and he's walking every mile  
as we stay with one another in his name.  
All we have between us is a loaf; all we have between us is a table.  
As we break the bread together we will recognize our brother,  
and we'll stay with one another breaking bread, for a time.*

*Shall we stay forever in this place? Shall we go back home and tell the others?  
If we stay on holy ground we'll lose the miracle we've found  
and we'll be left with one another in this place.  
We don't need a special place or time; we don't have to travel to Emmaus.  
Any road and any table we can meet you Lord, again;  
We can stay with one another, any place, any time.*

Amen.