Third Sunday of Easter 26 April 2020

Luke 24: 13-34

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If I were to ask you to tell me the story of Christmas, I think you’d know what to include. You would likely tell me about the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary and her Magnificat. You’d probably tell me of Joseph’s dream and how when it came time for the baby to be born, there had been no room in the inn, so the Son of God was laid in a manger. And you would probably include angels and shepherds and magi and “good news of great joy,” wouldn’t you? We know how that story goes, but what of Easter?

Why don’t we do Easter pageants the way we do Christmas pageants? Maybe it’s because there is so much to Easter that we really don’t know. Just look at the way the disciples in today’s story describe what they had experienced. Some women went to the tomb, but the body of Jesus wasn’t there, but some angels were there…or maybe that was a vision (*since women can be irrational and emotional and tend to embellish things*). Some other disciples, who were responding to the women, went to the tomb, and they didn’t see the body or the angels. They had hoped to see Jesus, but he wasn’t there. Peter peered into the tomb and only saw the grave clothes lying there, and his response was to go home because what did he really know anyway? It seemed to be that Jesus might have risen, but his death was so real, and his rising was only rumored, and so what did they really know or believe, and how was anyone going to tell this story?

I think it rather remarkable, given what we know, or don’t know, of how the Easter story unfolds, that so many seem to equate faith and knowing. In the denomination of my childhood, the preacher would often ask, “Do you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?” In the fellowship hall of my grandma’s church, there was a big banner strung from corner to corner that said, “If you died today, do you know you would go to heaven?” The problem is, you think you know Jesus, you think you’re saved, until somebody asks you if you know you are. At the end of worship, the preacher would call for an altar call, and he would say “I just know there is someone in this congregation this morning who wants to know the Lord,” and it always made me wonder if I was the one the preacher was talking about. Did he know something I didn’t know? (Was it ever a blessed relief when someone went up the center aisle to answer the call!)

There is an incredible emphasis and play on the word “knowing” in today’s gospel story. On the Road to Emmaus, a couple of Jesus’ followers are walking from Jerusalem, and a stranger comes and begins to walk in step with them, joining them for the journey. He asks what they are talking about, and they turn to him and ask, “Are you the only one who does not know what has taken place the last three days?” The irony is, of course, that they don’t know the one they’ve supposed is a stranger is really Jesus. It’s finally, at the end, that Jesus is made known to them in the breaking of bread, and the disciples say to each other, “Weren’t our hearts burning within us? Didn’t we know him all along?”

One of the places in this story that moves me is that description of the disciples on the Emmaus Road. Scripture says they are looking sad. I imagine their heads are down as they walk and that their shoulders slump like we do when we’re carrying in our bodies what we don’t know how to express with our words. I think we can relate to these disciples because they have come from death, and they are mired in grief, and they don’t know what is supposed to happen next or what they are to believe. This Emmaus Road is the Road of Not Knowing, and we’ve all traveled on it. It’s the wait you’ve had for test results. It’s the drive back to the house after the funeral and the new normal that awaits you. It’s the reality of a global pandemic and shelter in place orders and whether or when our lives will return to what we knew of if they can or should. It’s the answers and the faith we all wish we had, and some of the very best news in scripture comes to me when I realize it is when we are on this Not Knowing Road that Jesus comes to us and walks in step with us.

For a long time, I was led to believe that faith was about knowing Jesus, about knowing the right things to pray and to say, about having answers when the Sunday school teacher asked. It seemed Jesus would come to me when I had my life straightened out, when I got over my grief and fears. It turns out, I was wrong. Faith comes to us on the Emmaus Road, on the Not Knowing Road. When you find yourself along that path, whether or not you can know it, Jesus will be walking with you, not because of something you’ve done or not done, but because Jesus knows you need him and his risen life.

During this Easter season, the liturgy has us greeting one another: “Alleluia! Christ is risen.” “Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!” That word “indeed” gets me. How can we be so sure? How do we really know? Why don’t we hesitate to answer this way? Could it be because Jesus has been made known to us? Come to think of it, haven’t our hearts burned within us? Haven’t we known him on the road all along? Indeed.