

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Third Sunday of Easter, Year A, April 30, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“The Emmaus Road Experience”
Luke 24:13-35

our Gospel story today relates the experience of two disciples as they walked to Emmaus, and later back to Jerusalem; I like to call this story the “Emmaus Road experience” in order to contrast it against the “Damascus Road experience” that St Paul will later have, as related in Acts ch 9; recall that Paul was on his way to Damascus in order to arrest Christians there and bring them back in chains to Jerusalem; but along the road he sees a blinding light, Jesus talks to him with a voice like thunder out of the sky, and this leads to his conversion and to his becoming a follower of Jesus -- in a stark 180° turnaround from persecutor to evangelist; this striking turnaround has led, in our common parlance, to any dramatic conversion to be called a “Damascus Road experience”

notice just how different the Emmaus Road experience is; the people along the Emmaus Road are already disciples: not part of the inner circle of the twelve, but part of the larger outer circle of his followers; they are going about their ordinary lives, later in the same day of the first Easter, as if nothing special at all had happened that morning; they are well aware of Jesus’ death, as they relate the story in detail to this seeming stranger who just happens to fall in with them along the road; they are saddened by Jesus’ death, but they don’t seem really to understand what happened; and they don’t even seem really to believe the reports from some of the women and other disciples about them having seen angels and Jesus’ body not being in the tomb; they don’t seem really to believe that Jesus could be alive

those two disciples walk and talk at length with the risen Jesus without recognizing either his face or his speech; the stranger appears to be going along farther down the road, but they urged him strongly to stay with them for dinner; and only when he takes up their bread to bless and break and distribute it do they finally recognize him; and in that instant he disappears; and then, only in retrospect, do they realize how striking a character he was; how knowledgeable he was; and how their hearts “burned”, recognizing something special about him; only then do they realize they have had their own experience with the risen Jesus

I think this Emmaus Road experience is a lot more like the way most of us experience Jesus than is the Damascus Road experience; we are already Jesus' disciples, having been baptized when young and raised in the church; we're not in any kind of inner circle, but just regular believers; and don't we have our own doubts at times?; we don't understand everything about Jesus or about our faith; we've not seen Jesus with our own eyes; and yet, Jesus is with us and among us, even as we go about our ordinary day-to-day lives, even though we're not normally aware of his presence

but, from time to time, something else happens; perhaps only after certain out-of-the-ordinary moments may any of us ever have become aware of Jesus' presence in our lives: maybe after an especially moving worship experience; maybe when a Bible passage clicked and suddenly made sense out of certain things; maybe in an answering of a prayer; maybe at a time of extreme sadness or of extreme joy when you felt and knew you were not alone; often such a recognition may happen only in retrospect when we look back at a time, or a place, or an experience and can say "oh, now I can see how Jesus was with me during that moment in my life"; just like those disciples along the Emmaus Road

I've not known many people who have gone from being a complete non-believer to a believer in the flash of a moment, like Paul did; most of us and most of the the people we know, I imagine, have grown from being good believers to being better believers, little by little, throughout our lives, as we have grown in understanding, as we have grown in faith, as we have grown in spiritual experiences, and as we have grown in our relationship with Jesus -- knowing him better, loving him more, and reflecting his teachings and example more and more in our lives

Christian life is a journey, a pilgrimage along the road of faith; the first name given to Jesus' followers, as a group, before they were ever called "Christians" was that of "followers of the Way"; that's the way Paul described the believers he was going to hunt down in Damascus: "any who belonged to the Way"; and that's what Christianity is: it is a way of life, one that puts us on a path of following Jesus and of following his example

there are a couple of very key aspects in this story about the Emmaus Road experience that help us to be better followers of Jesus' Way; notice that the disciples were willing and eager to talk about their faith, and especially so with a person who did not know about Jesus; that is also important for us: to be ready, willing, and able to talk about our faith; notice also that when this stranger said he was going farther on down the road, the disciples strongly urged him to stay; they took the initiative to invite him to their meal, to share what they had with him, and to continue building their relationship with him; and not because they had anything they hoped to gain from it: just from pure hospitality; that too is also important for us: to anticipate other people's needs, even before they ask; and to invite them to stay with us a little longer; that we openly and genuinely say and mean, "yes we want to get to know you better;" "yes, we want to share our food with you;" "yes, we want to share our lives with you;" "yes, we want to help make your journey in life an easier one"

so keep your eyes and ears open, disciples; you don't have to understand everything about the faith; you don't have to be one of the inner circle: an ordained minister or a staff person at a church; you don't even have to be 100% sure of what you believe; all you have to do, to be a follower of the Way, of Jesus' Way, is the willingness to join in a conversation with a stranger, tell them what you know about Jesus from your own experience, and invite them to share in fellowship with you and with other believers; keep your eyes, ears, and hearts open for any Emmaus Road experience that the Lord may bring your way; keep your eyes, ears, and hearts open for Jesus walking along the Way with you