

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2015
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Luke's accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus have about them the quality of the corporate life of the early church. There is a familiar pattern that reflects or is reflected in the pattern of gatherings among early Christians; disciples experiencing doubt and despair, Jesus appearance and confrontation, opening of scripture, sharing of a meal, followed by rejoicing and witness. There is an integral and unbreakable connection between our life together and our experience of the Risen Savior. Our gatherings are the place of surprise and discovery. If we join the Apostles during that first Easter Season, we will find...

In company with one another, we are discovered by the Risen Christ. This gathering of Jesus' followers (Luke 24:36b-48) comes right after Cleopas and his companion experienced the Risen Christ on the Road to Emmaus. Today's reading begins at the point where they have returned to Jerusalem and are telling the others what happened. Jesus came and stood among them. They were not expecting him or looking for him. It takes a special opening of the eyes to see the Risen Christ because there is an inward blindness that must be overcome. We have a way of seeing what we want to or the way we want to. Jesus discovers us in this condition and desires to correct it!

In company with one another, we discover him. "They were terrified." But Jesus said to them, "Why are you alarmed?" They could not believe their eyes. He showed them his hands and feet, ate some of the meal they were sharing, and explained what they were experiencing in the light of sacred texts. Recognition of Jesus did not occur until they received the witness of scripture and sacrament. It always amazes me that so many people are amazed that the Church expects its members to be regular participants in worship. Some say, "Attending worship doesn't guarantee that you'll be a good Christian. I can be a good Christian and never darken the doors of a church." You can be a good person but not a new creature. You can do your own thing, but Christianity is not one's own thing. It is a corporate experience. The witness of Scripture, the teaching of the church, the experience of millions of Christians for nearly 2000 years is that gathering for word and sacrament on a regular basis is essential because it is in worship that the chief means of grace are offered to nourish and sustain us in the Christian life. It is true that we can discover Christ anywhere. But the normal way, the primary way, the most reliable way Jesus Christ encounters people is through word and sacrament with the gathered community of his followers.

In company with one another, we discover our faith. One way of thinking about faith is in terms of a set or system of beliefs or doctrines. But, first and foremost, faith is trust in God. St. Peter, in trying to explain the healing of the man who could not walk, says, "What you see and know was done by faith in Jesus' name; it was faith in Jesus that has made him well, as you can see" (Acts 3:18-19). For most of us, mature faith does not come all at once as a finished product. We grow into it over time. In fact, the most exemplary saints are never sure the process is ever complete. In the experience of worship, more than any experience of our lives, we place ourselves in the presence of the Risen Christ and in his presence we discover our faith – together.

In company with one another, we discover one another. We do not come into this house of worship from a vacuum where nothing has ever happened. When we gather for worship, we bring the hopes and

hurts of our lives with us. We share those things – we share who we are with one another – and in that sharing in the context of our own struggles to believe, we discover one another. In a gathering to discuss the last General Convention, a man expressed his opinion that The Episcopal Church is declining because of certain controversial issues among us in recent years. When it was his turn to speak, one of my colleagues responded by saying the reason we have declined, more than anything else, is that we have forgotten how to tell people about Jesus Christ. For us to recover that ability, we need to first recover the ability to share our faith one-on-one within the company of Jesus followers. We need to make all our meals and all our meetings experiences of shared faith in the Risen Christ.

In company with one another, we discover our feet. After their encounter with the Risen One in Emmaus, those disciples went to the others. The sense of the text is that they couldn't wait to get there. When Jesus stood among them, he told them, “YOU are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:48). What if this church became that excited about its mission, so that we couldn't wait to get out there and roll up our sleeves? What mission takes is people whose experience with the Risen Christ gets them out of their seat and up on their feet and into the street. There is energy and power in it! And, it is not our own energy and power but the energy of God that raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus shows us that he also desires to give life to our mortal bodies. I submit to you today that our decisions to reach out to others are grounded in corporate worship. What we do in here produces results out there. We are able to bear fruit because we return week after week to make sure we are still grafted into the Vine, without whom we can do nothing.

In company with one another, we discover our voice. When Cleopas and his companion arrived in Jerusalem and found the other disciples, they told what they'd seen. They found the others telling about their experience of the Resurrection also. There was amazement. There was praise. There was energy in that room when all those who'd encountered the Risen Christ got there. That energy freed their voices to go to others and tell. On the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 responded to their witness and joined them in following Christ. In worship we discover the courage to give all and risk all for the sake of his gospel. People need to give and risk in order to experience a growing and vital faith. Through word and sacrament, we are encountered by the Risen Christ, our fears and our faith are put in balance, we discover ways to share faith with one another, we discover our feet moving out to where our priestly ministry is needed, we discover our voice to praise and witness, and we discover the courage to give all and risk all for the sake of this gospel.

Our sermons during the Easter season will be influenced by a book I have found helpful over the past few years, *The Five Practices of Fruitful Churches* by Robert Schnase. We'll also be encouraging all of you to read the book and carry on the conversation between Sundays. Along the way and at the end of the six weeks, I'm going to be challenging you to examine how these five practices might apply to the mission of The Episcopal Church in Jackson Hole as you look to the future with a new rector. The five practices, as identified by Robert Schnase in his book are, Radical hospitality, Passionate worship, Intentional faith development, Risk-taking mission and service, and Extravagant generosity. The author observes that most churches would describe themselves as places where hospitality, worship, formation, service, and generosity may be found. What differentiates *fruitful* congregations is when these **characteristics** become **practices** that are so obvious that one must find adjectives that are powerful enough to describe what is going on. For example, if someone who visits us today experiences the hospitality we extend to them and tries to describe it in the office tomorrow morning, might they describe it as “radical?” As Robert Schnase says in his book,

“The words *radical* and *hospitality* are not usually together in one phrase. To advance

the church, perhaps they should be. Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ. It describes a genuine love for others who are not yet a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a love that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers” (*Five Practices*, pp.11-12).

I hope you will read the book, visit the website, have conversations, and open your life to the possibilities we will be exploring together in the coming weeks. I hope you will gather with us and let the Risen Christ help us make some new, possibly terrifying, discoveries that will lead to a renewal of mission. For, Jesus says to us, as he said to the Apostles long ago, “You are witnesses of these things.” And that same Risen Lord wants that witness to bear fruit for the sake of the creation for which he offers his very life.