

“Our Hearts Burned” – Rev. Dr. Tom LaBonte

Luke 24:13-35

April 11, 2021

Years ago, I preached on Luke 24 in unusual circumstances. After knee replacement surgery I arranged for a guest preacher for the four weeks of light duty the surgeon had proscribed. By the third Sunday I'm missing Church so Starann and I look forward to being part of the congregation. At 11 am I'm sitting in the first pew and get a tap on the shoulder: the guest preacher is in Hickory and can't find us in Mooresville! // I look over my shoulder and all eyes are on me. I hobble up to the pulpit, totally unprepared. I comment in the Reformed Tradition we believe the Holy Spirit guides Pastors on what to preach. I tell them we are going to test this belief. From comments at the end, it appeared to the congregation the Holy Spirit did his part. This morning I hope the Holy Spirit will continue to do his part as together we join Christ on the Road to Emmaus.

In his three-year ministry Jesus teaches the disciples by his example to live his Gospel as faithful witnesses to God. For the disciples to carry on his ministry they must believe in their hearts and minds he is the Messiah. They must persevere in spreading his Gospel when challenged, persecuted, and facing death. But as many times as they see him perform miracles that can only come from God, they do not completely believe in him and the prophecies of his death and resurrection. How many times during his ministry and after his resurrection do you think Jesus wonders: *“What does it take for these guys to believe in me? When are they going to get it and carry on with what I have taught them?”* It is apparent the only way they will believe his resurrection is for Jesus to physically appear to them. While his boys don't get it, the women do! Jesus sends Mary Magdalene to share the good news of his resurrection to his brethren. But they doubt her. By his appearance on that Sunday evening Jesus will change his disciples' grief, fear, despair, and feelings of abandonment to pure joy. Our message this morning takes place mid-day on that Resurrection Sunday. This is one of the most compelling appearance stories of Jesus. He gives believers then and now a timeless message of love, inspiration, and reassurance. The plot revolves around the failure of two of his disciples to recognize their fellow traveler. He walks beside them for the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. The stranger teaches them God's Word on the gift of his Son as the Savior of humanity. They hang on his every word, hungering for more knowledge. At the evening meal their eyes are opened, and Jesus disappears. They run back to Jerusalem to share the good news with their brethren and arrive just after Jesus appears to the eleven disciples. This is the high-level narrative. We will dig into the “rest of the story” Jesus would have us understand and live.

{READ Luke 24:13-16} Midday on that blessed Sunday two followers of Jesus leave Jerusalem talking about the rumor of the empty tomb. They see a stranger approaching because Jesus has cloaked his identity. ***Do you ever wonder how many times Jesus approaches us as a stranger?*** He may disguise himself as a homeless person, someone asking for food, who is dressed poorly, and different looking from you and me. Why would he do this? Is he testing us? Possibly. His behavior reveals what he expects of us. Jesus in his ministry does not ignore or reject a needy person. He does not judge based on one's nationality or ethnicity. He helps people considered unclean in Jewish society: tax collectors, Romans, and a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. He does not avoid people with serious kinds of illness, even healing lepers viewed by Jews as the most ritually unclean. Jesus looks deeply into the hearts of those he meets. He lives as a servant of the people and expects the same behavior from us. In our words, actions, and treatment of others, he wants us to reveal his Gospel as a God sighting with all whom we meet.

Over 30 years ago, just after I retired from the military, I believe I encountered Christ when a man asked me for help. As I arrived at the building where I was to attend a meeting, I saw a man going door to door asking for help. He was rejected. Walking between homes he would reach down to his stomach in pain. He needed a meal. I got out of my car and he asked me for help. I don't know why I turned him down, but I did. He said to me, **“You are supposed to help people!”** He was giving me a second chance to do what was right. But I ignored him and walked into the building and met my friend. I told him about the hungry man to see what food might be available. He said he had given him a mountain dew and snacks. To this day I regret not directly helping him. I could have taken him out for food. I should have. But I didn't. I was tested and failed. I have repented and asked forgiveness, and I know I am forgiven. It is hard for me to forgive myself. My behavior that day is still a wound piercing my heart. I learned a lesson I will never forget.

{READ Luke 24:17-27} The two disciples invite the stranger to join them on the seven-mile trip to Emmaus. He asks what they are talking about. Sadly, they tell him of the arrest, crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus. Their answer to the stranger's question is revealing. They speak of Jesus as a mighty prophet rather than as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, who died on the cross. They say some of "*our women*" found the empty tomb and astonished us saying they had a vision from an Angel that Jesus was alive. It is surprising there is reluctance to accept the testimony of these women who had also followed Jesus for three years. This doubt is emphasized when the disciple says some of "us," meaning the boys, went to the tomb, but we didn't see any Angels or Jesus. They hoped he would free the people of Israel from the Godless Romans and restore God's people to greatness. But that has not happened. In their disappointment they reveal the despair of their lack of faith in Jesus as the risen Christ.

In Jesus Christ we worship a God of light and hope. Our adversary, Satan, is the champion of darkness and despair. This is illustrated in the story of God sending an Angel to take away from Satan his most important temptations used to seduce humanity. After a bit of argument, the Devil agrees. He begs to be allowed to keep what he describes as one of the least important of all his temptations. "Which is?" asks the Angel. "**Despair**," he says. He gets his wish and the Angel returns to heaven leaving despair behind. "Good," laughs Satan with joy. "My favorite temptation and my future are secure."

Despair is self-destructive and speaks to a lack of faith and trust in the "One who comes to save." How does the stranger respond to his travel companions' despair and lack of faith and trust? He challenges them, which I paraphrase as, "What's wrong with you guys? Don't you remember the Word and promises of God through the Prophets about the Messiah? Wise up and listen."

For the next three hours they walk the dusty road together as the stranger teaches **God's Word through the Prophets**. He doesn't teach as one who uses a commentary regurgitating what other Rabbis have taught. He interprets God's will about the Messiah who brings salvation by God's grace through the sacrifice of his body and blood. He speaks of the resurrection and of the promise of God that the Messiah will one day return in judgment and glory. He teaches the steadfast love, care, and faithfulness of God to all who love and obey Him. They are mesmerized by this man who shares the Word of God.

{READ Luke 24:28-32} As they near Emmaus the two disciples ask the man to join them for supper. They want to continue their conversation. They sit down at the table and as the stranger blesses the meal, their eyes are opened. Then he disappears. They are stunned and overwhelmed with joy and excitement. It is Jesus! "*Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*" Our Lord and Savior lives – he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and has conquered death.

{READ Luke 24:33-35} Despite the hour and their fatigue, the two men leave Emmaus and hurry back the seven miles to Jerusalem. Cleopas and his friend burst into the room where the eleven disciples are staying and shout, Jesus lives, we have seen him. They reply, "we know, he was just here with us". Then all give thanks to God for the revelation of the risen Christ.

Christ Jesus is risen! He lives, now and forever! This is the greatest story ever told. Just like the two disciples on the Road, we too are on an eternal, life journey with Jesus. This is a life journey of service to God and to our neighbor, defined by Christ as all whom we encounter. Jesus meets each of us on the Road to our Emmaus, in the ordinary places, people and experiences of our lives. He meets us and lifts us up in the places where we retreat when life seems too much to bear. When he calls us through the work of the Spirit, in dreams, in a voice speaking within, and we respond, then we will be transformed. "Our hearts will burn" feeling his love and comfort, joy and peace, as we walk down the road of life with our Risen Lord.