

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 23 April 2023
Third Sunday of Easter - Year A

1st Reading: Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Psalm: 116:1-4, 12-19

2nd Reading: 1 Peter 1:17-23

Gospel: Luke 24:13-35

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Have any of you walked from here to Pearl City, or maybe to Winslow? Not a great distance, but it would take some effort. When I was in high school my summer job was to walk beans. I expect that many of you know what that means. Coral, from New York, was a bit bemused when I first mentioned “walking beans” to her, and with her usual insight asked if that was like walking dogs. Did I put a leash on them and lead them around?

Well, for any of you who may not know what “walking beans” is all about, it is a job where one walks up and down all the rows of soybeans in a field, pulling out any weeds one might find along the way. I never calculated how many miles I walked in a day doing this job, but I was certainly tired out by the end of the day.

The two disciples in our Gospel reading this morning did some walking. One was named Cleopas, and the other was probably his wife Mary, who seems to be mentioned as one of those standing beneath Jesus’ cross along with Jesus’ mother Mary and Mary Magdalene. Cleopas and his wife had probably walked from their home in the village of Emmaus to Jerusalem a few days earlier to celebrate the Passover there, and like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany, were probably friends of Jesus and the apostles. Seven miles, not too great a distance to walk in a day, but I’m sure they still would have enjoyed their rest at the end of their journey.

Now that the Passover was completed, they were walking that seven miles back home to Emmaus, but in a very somber mood. Jesus had been crucified, died, and had been placed in a tomb. But Jesus was not only their friend. They had recognised him as “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people”, and they “had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” Yet this was not all. They were also perplexed because they had heard that very morning that Mary Magdalene had seen angels who told her that Jesus was alive. And then Peter and John had gone to the tomb and found it empty. But by the time Cleopas and his wife had left Jerusalem, no one had yet seen Jesus himself.

But that was all to change very quickly. Jesus did appear to Mary Magdalene, but she didn't recognise him until he spoke her name. Then Jesus appeared to Peter and the other disciples, but Cleopas and his wife had not yet heard these stories. And then we hear the wondrous tale. Jesus appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and began walking with them to Emmaus, but like Mary Magdalene they did not recognise him at first, not until he performed the familiar act of breaking bread before their meal. But the moment they recognised him, he vanished into thin air right before their eyes.

Now what were they to do? It was already evening, and they had settled comfortably at home, ready for supper and then rest after their long walk. But no, they were so excited that they had seen Jesus that they got up immediately, and walked the seven miles back to Jerusalem, in the dark, which was pretty much unheard of in those days because bandits often lurked on the roadways to accost travellers. And in addition, it would have been uphill the whole way back to Jerusalem. Yet the news that Jesus had appeared to them was simply too fantastic for them not to run all the way back and tell the apostles. And once they arrived back in Jerusalem, their story was confirmed because Jesus had also appeared to Peter that same day.

Now, those who doubt the Christian message, would like us to believe that all these sightings of Jesus were just wishful thinking, or delusions, or even outright lies, or at best they were symbolic. According to this theory, Cleopas and his wife recognising Jesus in the breaking of the bread just means that they had a spiritual experience like we sometimes do when we have communion, and it is in that way that Jesus was present - just symbolically, but not really physically.

Well, it is certainly true that Jesus *is* present among us in the bread and wine of communion, but this is not *instead* of him being present physically with the disciples after his resurrection. Indeed, he is present with us in communion *because* he was already present with his disciples in his physically resurrected body, and can therefore be present with us as well, even though like Thomas we do need to trust the evidence given us by the original eyewitnesses in order to experience this.

And I also think that if these stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances had just been made up, the disciples would have done a better job of making them sound believable. Instead, they are confusing and a bit bewildering. Jesus' has risen from the dead. His physical body is present. The wounds of his crucifixion are still there, but have been perfected in some way that is not altogether clear.

He eats and drinks and breathes, although we might expect that a perfected body would no longer need such nourishment. And yet he is able to appear out of nowhere behind locked doors or on a path, and then he vanishes before the witnesses' eyes. They don't recognise him, but then they do, but just as they recognise him, he is gone - where? Somewhere else it seems, ready to appear to another group of witnesses. So although he appears to different witnesses in different places, he does seem to have only been physically present in one place at any given time.

So we may wonder at what sort of body this resurrected Jesus has, and wonder what this might mean for ourselves. John tells us in his first letter: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is". So Jesus' resurrected body actually gives us a sneak preview of what our own bodies will be like when we are also resurrected. So we also may be able to come and go in an instant, with perfect bodies that are free from disease and age, and yet still recognisable as our own bodies. What a wonderful, mysterious adventure awaits us in that new creation.

But then we may also ask, where is Jesus now? He appeared in this strange resurrected body to various disciples over a period of forty days and then in his own words, "returned to the Father". And because he has returned to the Father, the Holy Spirit has come to us as his presence in and among us now. During those forty days it seems that Jesus was able to be in only one place at a time, but now that he has ascended to the Father, he has, as the Celtic saints teach us, been set free to be anywhere.

So can we still encounter the Risen Jesus? The answer is a resounding Yes, and because he has been "set free", Christians throughout the world can encounter him in different places at the same time. So Yes, we encounter him in Communion, in the breaking and sharing of the bread. Yes, we see and hear him in his words and stories recorded in the Gospels. Yes, he is with us through the Holy Spirit, present in our hearts and in the church. But he may also be with us in new, wonderful, and surprising ways as well.

We sometimes say that God is everywhere, Jesus is everywhere. But this can be a little bit like saying that Jesus is really nowhere, because he is nowhere in particular. He appeared to the apostles in particular places at particular times, but now he is "everywhere".

So I have come to prefer, instead of saying that Jesus is *everywhere*, to say that he *can* be *anywhere*. Any particular place can be a place where we encounter the Risen Lord. And he can come to us in surprising ways in surprising places at surprising times: in church, of course, in our private prayers, with us along the path as we walk, down the road, through the woods, in the valley of the shadow of death. Often we do not recognise him when he is with us, but if we open our eyes and our ears to him, we can be ready to recognise him in any particular place. And then our hearts burn within us as we hear his voice, and we may even become so excited that we rush off, in the dark, for miles, uphill, to share this wonderful experience with those we love.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

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