

The Rev. Kristin P. R. Wickersham
Take, Break, Bless, Give
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church
Third Sunday of Easter, Year A
April 26, 2020

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of Jesus' disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Several of you have talked with me about the strange way we've been experiencing time since the pandemic struck. Days stretch out and feel longer than normal. At other points it seems time has flown past and May is arriving much faster than usual. Some of us have been counting the days since social distancing. Other's need to look at the calendar to remind ourselves of what day of the week it is. We've lost our personal and communal sense of the rhythms of time and our lives together. Alongside that, we've also lost our physical closeness to each other, and we've lost something else that's hard to put a name on. Normally, we have some sense of the future, of things that we can count on, and how we expect our lives will be. That's missing right now. We're not sure what's going to happen next, or when that might be. Many of us are waiting for the time when we can get back to normal, whatever that was. But, when tragedy and loss happen, life is never the same.

This is what was happening to the disciples in today's story. They've experienced the most profound tragedy. Jesus, the person in whom they'd put their hopes, has been crucified. They've heard his body wasn't in the tomb, but they don't know what that means. This is the beginning of Easter. Easter is also a pretty mixed-up time for the lectionary readings. Last week, we read about Jesus' appearance to the apostle Thomas. That happened about a week after the crucifixion and resurrection. But this week's gospel story goes backwards in time to the morning of the resurrection. According to Luke, this is the first post-resurrection sighting of Jesus. The women have gone to the tomb and found the stone rolled back, but they didn't encounter Jesus. Luke says they encountered two messengers of

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God, two angels. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" And they left the tomb to go and tell the others.

Later that day, two disciples of Jesus are walking on the road to Emmaus. We don't know why they left Jerusalem, only that they did. They're grieving and sad when they encounter someone they don't know. That person, who sees their downcast faces, asks them what's happened. The disciples can't believe there's anyone who doesn't know the enormous tragedy that's happened. Their leader, whom they loved, murdered in a torturous death, crucified by Roman authorities, three days prior. They had hoped that he was the one to free Israel from imperial Rome. They had hoped. Now, after their trauma, hope was gone. And in their hopeless grief, they're kept from recognizing who was with them.

They begin a conversation with the unrecognized stranger, and they talk about the scriptures. The church teaches that holy scriptures are an encounter with Jesus Christ in the living Word. But they didn't even recognize him there, they were so caught up in their grief. Ultimately, they extend hospitality and invite the stranger to stay with them somewhere in the town of Emmaus. That evening, something happens that's both ordinary and extraordinary: a basic meal. Gathered together at the table, Jesus takes bread, gives thanks for it, breaks it, and gives it. After all that time together, they finally see who they've been traveling with. They recognize the spirit of Jesus, who then vanishes from their sight.

This story is usually told during Easter, and we talk about it as a Eucharistic story. These are the actions of the Eucharist: Take, Bless, Break, Give. The sacrament of Eucharist is focused on this ordinary, life-sustaining thing, bread. It's the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of God. We use it in our liturgies in memory of the last supper. When a priest takes, blesses, breaks, and gives bread, this is what we're doing. Ordinarily we do this every Sunday, but this isn't an ordinary time. Right now we're like those disciples. We're walking down a new road, traveling a path we weren't expecting. Even a few short weeks ago, none of us could have described this experience. Maybe some of us are trying to leave anxiety and grief behind. Perhaps some of us are hoping that if we don't look too closely at what's been happening around us, it can all go back to how it used to be once the state and the country re-open the economy. Some of us feel very alone, separated from our community and unable to be with people we love. That loneliness and isolation might prevent us from seeing clearly. Remembering today's gospel story might help us to clear our spiritual vision as we look at ordinary things in the world right now.

Last week, I read a touching letter. A farmer named Dennis, from Northeast Kansas sent a handwritten note to Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York. Dennis and his wife Sherry retired from farming some years ago. Sherry has breathing difficulties and only one lung. She's also diabetic. They're both more than 70 years old. Dennis is afraid that his wife will catch this virus, and if she does, she'll die. He wrote Governor Cuomo to talk about the tragedy of this pandemic both in the country, and in New York, which is still the biggest hot spot of COVID-19 Coronavirus infection. Yesterday 422 people died in New York city from the virus.

In the leftover things from his farming days, Dennis had found a small supply of N-95 masks. These are the best kind of mask for personal protection from the virus and the ones hospitals are in such need of. Dennis had 5. He broke up his stash, giving one to each of his four family members. Instead of saving the last one in case he might need an extra, Dennis wrapped it carefully and sent it in a package

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to Governor Cuomo. He thanked the governor for his leadership, and asked him to give the mask to a doctor or a nurse in need. Dennis took what he had, he gave thanks, he broke it, and he gave it.

Can you see the spirit of Christ in those actions? Take, give thanks, break, give. Did you recognize that Jesus was there walking alongside of us? Now imagine with me what it would look like if, in the face of our uncertainty, tragedy, and grief, we could all be like that. Take what we have, give thanks, break, and give. Perhaps the story tell us that Jesus disappeared from their midst after those actions because the disciples understood what Jesus was teaching them. It was their job not just to accept the gift, but to go into the world and be like Jesus. And understanding that, they left immediately and ran back to Jerusalem to tell the others. Go and tell. Jesus is still with us.

Right now, we're fasting from the sacrament of Eucharist, but sacraments aren't limited to the church. Church sacraments are practice for seeing the sacred in the world, for participating in the inbreaking of the reign of God. What we do in liturgy is practice for how we live in the world. It's practice for having eyes to see Jesus. When we are at our saddest, most isolated, most grief-stricken times, when hope has become something we talk about in the past tense, we aren't walking the path alone. Jesus is walking alongside of us. Look for him. He will be with ordinary people, taking something lifegiving, giving thanks, breaking it, and giving it to those who are in need. Have hope. Go and tell. Go and do likewise.

Amen.