

In Breaking Bread

I Peter 1:17-23

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 24:13-35

May 4, 2014 Easter 3A

The sun is setting. Shadows deepen. You and Cleopas walk through the city gate and head for the fork in the road that will lead you to Emmaus. You just have to get out of the city; away from the terrible violence that has disrupted so many lives. You have to go home. Emmaus isn't home, but it's in the right direction. There's an inn there, a decent comfortable place to spend the night, so that you can rest for the journey that will lead you north. There are enough other people on the road so that you aren't frightened about meeting robbers, but not so many other travelers that you'll be distracted. And everyone seems quiet and somber.

As you walk, you don't say much. It isn't a companionable silence, although you and Cleopas have been friends for years. Instead, you're each walking side by side, but still alone. You're each engulfed in the tragedy and confusion of the past few days. To speak of it would just release a torrent of anguish and tears, and dredge up those awful images of bloodshed and bodies hanging from crosses.

Neither one of you were one of the inner circle, the twelve, yet you had loved Jesus, this haunting teacher from Galilee, and he had helped you find God's love in a new and deeper way. His way—it had just seemed so right, somehow. Around Jesus, you had learned daily of God's grace and love. Around Jesus, God felt close. He had given you hope in an otherwise dark and hopeless age. He had called you by name. He was the Good Shepherd, and you were two of his sheep that he had called by name. You were friends.

So you and Cleopas plod along, and wonder how things could have gone so wrong so quickly. Why did Jesus have to go to Jerusalem for the Passover? He knew that the Roman rulers and the religious authorities had a price on his head. And evidently Judas had known it, too, from the rumors that you've been hearing. There were many lepers that needed cleansing, many blind people who needed to see, many lame and paralyzed people that needed to walk and run and play, many people

caught up in the anguish of their own sins who needed forgiveness, scattered all over Judea and Galilee. Why did Jesus bring his career to an end so abruptly by coming to the city? Why did he walk right into the trap his enemies had set? Should we have tried to talk him out of it? Would he have listened?

Questions looped continually through your brain. And the emotions. You feel anger toward those who killed Jesus. You feel anguish and despair that he is gone. You feel broken-hearted, and wonder if you will ever smile or laugh again. You wonder about the rumors of the empty tomb, and that some people have claimed to see him come back from the dead. But people just don't come back from the dead, do they?

Side by side, the two of you walk as the shadows deepen, still walking in silence. You sense someone coming up behind you, and you move over to let him pass. "Peace, my friends. May I join you?" he asks. You nod half-heartedly, and wave your hand in weak agreement. You really don't want company, but you're too polite to tell him to leave you alone. And maybe he'll provide some distraction.

Although it's hard to see him well in the waning light, he doesn't look like anyone special—average height and weight, everyday robe and tunic. He picks up your mood. "Friends, you look upset and sad. What's wrong?"

You blurt out, "You haven't heard? Are you the only man in Jerusalem so out of touch that you haven't heard what happened?" Suddenly you weren't afraid anymore. Maybe you didn't perceive this stranger as a threat who might turn you in to the authorities. Or maybe you just didn't care anymore. You had to get it off your chest. "A man of God, a holy man, a man who we thought would deliver our nation from oppression, a man who had healed the sick, a man who fed great crowds by multiplying a handful of food, this man was betrayed by one of his own and captured by the authorities last Thursday night. Late that night and on Friday morning, there were unjust trials, mockeries of justice, and he was condemned. They tortured him and nailed him to a cross to die. Don't you remember the darkness last Friday? It was as if the whole of nature were crying in grief."

You got choked up, and Cleopas continued the story. "Hanging on the cross, he forgave his enemies, not that they cared. He died on the cross, this one who had raised others from the dead. Some of his friends took his body and placed it in a borrowed tomb. Then today there were more stories that the tomb was empty. Maybe the powers that be wanted to desecrate his body, I don't know."

Then the stranger began to talk. His words were harsh, but his tone was caring. "So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets had said? Don't you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into glory?" Then the stranger started quoting scriptures, not just quoting them, but weaving them together like the most learned rabbi. He gave us a new way of looking at what God had planned all along. It got us thinking! What if this weren't just another unjust death of a good man, a prophet? What if something happened on the cross that changed the whole way that God and humankind related? What if his death wasn't the end but the beginning, not tragedy, but God's plan? And the way he kept quoting the scriptures to make his point. Your minds wanted to believe, and it all made good sense. Indeed, your hearts were warmed to hear his words. Hope was reborn just a bit with each step you walked.

The miles sped by as you heard this new friend teach. His teaching reminded you of things that Jesus had said, but somehow your new companion still seemed a stranger. You didn't recognize him. But because he had lifted your spirits and given you so much new hope, you wanted to talk with him longer. The inn came into sight, and as you began to pull off into the path that would lead you there, both of you invited him to come, have a meal, maybe spend the night. You were pleased when he accepted your invitation.

As the meal began in this dimly lit room, he, who had been your guest, took on the role of the host. He broke the bread as an act of thanksgiving and fellowship, and recited the prayer of grace. Suddenly you and Cleopas shared glances in surprise and delight. You knew it! You recognized him. It was the Lord! It was Jesus! In the way he broke the bread, in the movement of his

hands, in the love for God that seemed to fill his eyes, in the inflection of his prayer, you knew that this was the Christ. You knew that the rumors were true. He was alive! He was changed, but he- was- alive!

And then, just as suddenly, he was no longer there. "Am I crazy, or was Jesus just here with us?" you asked. "You recognized him too, then?" Cleopas asked back. And together you looked back to earlier in the evening. "Didn't we feel on fire as he conversed along the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us?"

Even though it was dark out and most sane, reasonable people were in bed, you were no longer worried about being sane and reasonable. You paid for your dinners, you left the inn, and you rushed down the road that you had just plodded up. You stumbled here and there in the dark, but that didn't slow you. You just had to tell the others. When you got to the city, you found where the other disciples had gathered, you barged right in, and started telling them who you had seen, and they were telling you at the same time who they had seen. The risen Lord had appeared to them, too! You told them how you hadn't recognized Jesus even as he had taught you, but then, in the breaking of bread, you both had recognized him.

The story was true then, the story is true now. We still walk down roads of darkness and difficulty, overwhelmed by the present and afraid of the future. We still live in the past tense, unable and maybe afraid to move beyond it to present reality. And Jesus still walks with us, unrecognized, helping us sort things out. And it is still when we come together with other believers that we finally get it. Bread is broken. Wine is poured. Christ is there. Sometimes it happens at a church potluck, a funeral dinner, a family dinner, sometimes when we're sitting alone with our memories over a warmed can of soup, sometimes when we're singing along after dinner at church camp, and sometimes when we gather at this table. We break the bread. We pour the wine. And we know. We just know. The risen Christ is with us. Amen.

By Michael E, Dixon