

Easter 3, 4.26.2020

St. Mark's, Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

“What Shall I Render to the Lord?”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. A number of people have told me how hard it is for them not to be able to gather at church during this time. Some people have talked about how much strength they receive at church. Others have told me that during times of crisis and challenge, going to church really helps give them perspective about life. These thoughts and feelings probably speak for many of us. Experiencing the presence of the risen Jesus in the gathered church is something that truly transforms us, freeing us to live for others. During the Easter season we hear once again stories of Christ's transforming presence.

The story of the road to Emmaus is one of these stories. It is a story that captures the imagination and raises an important question: How do we discern the presence of Christ on our human journeys? On your own journey, where have you found Christ to be truly present offering grace and peace? Each of the Easter stories about encounters with the risen Jesus is unique. Peace overcomes fear at the empty tomb; faith overcomes doubt in the story of Thomas; forgiveness and acceptance overcome dejection and shame in the story of Peter and Jesus by the seaside. In each of the stories Jesus met his disciples exactly where they needed to be met. Like them, Jesus also meets us where we need to be met, offering strength and hope to help us overcome our challenges.

The journey of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was a journey from sadness and doubt to discovering the joy and certainty of Christ in their midst. Luke identifies only one disciple named “Cleopas.” Cleopas' fellow companion is not named. This may cause us to wonder who the other companion was, and though scholars have guessed, in the end it is impossible to know. More importantly, I think Luke left the other companion unnamed because this invites us into the story. We become the unnamed companion journeying alongside Cleopas toward Emmaus.

Another thing we notice is that the two companions did not yet believe in the presence of the risen Jesus. Instead, they were talking about and discussing what had happened. When Jesus joined them, Luke makes a point of telling us that they “stood still, looking sad.” They were not yet overcome with joy at the news that Jesus has been raised. Jesus asked them what they had been discussing, and they said to him, “*Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?*” There is a bit of humor here, and one can see

Jesus with a wry smile, asking, “*What things?*” They replied “*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.*” It was Easter Sunday afternoon and they were disappointed and skeptical.

What is clear in all the resurrection accounts about Jesus is that it took time for faith to grow in Jesus’ followers. The road to Emmaus was a journey from despair over Christ’s death to faith in his risen presence. In the Emmaus story the development of faith took place over the course of a journey. Hearing these Easter stories again encourages us to ask ourselves, “What has my journey of faith been like?” “How am I still developing in faith? How is Christ present with me here and now?” Like Cleopas and his companion, we also experience obstacles to our faith formation. The road to Emmaus was a road of disappointment, foolishness, and slowness of heart that eventually became an eye-opening road to faith.

Today I want to ask you to think about your own journey. How has your faith emerged and developed over time? What obstacles do you still encounter along the way? Jesus’ words to the two travelers are also words to each of us: “*Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe!*” Like the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, our hearts burn when we hear the God’s word. Our eyes are opened when we see the bread, and hear the words “*This is my body given for you.*” We recognize Jesus in our midst when we are welcomed as strangers; when we are forgiven; when we are prayed for, when we are visited. The presence of Jesus moves us from despair and doubt to certainty and hope. At such moments, we experience renewal of faith that can help us understand the present, imagine the future, and live for others.

Easter is not just a single day of the year. Easter is not simply a commemoration about something that happened in the distant past. Easter is an ongoing reality. Do you anticipate Christ’s presence on your human journey? Christ is the unseen stranger who journeys with you every day. Christ accompanies you on the road you travel. In the breaking of the bread, Christ gives himself to you as the bread of heaven. Christ is with you as word and sacrament, and this is one of the reasons why not being able to gather in the body at church during this time is so hard. Yet we know that Christ is also present with us now wherever we are. As Jesus told the woman at the well, we worship God in spirit and truth. Though we are isolated from one another, through the power of the Holy Spirit the risen Christ stands among us now in spirit and truth.

What would your life be like without Christ? Imagine what your life would be like in isolation without the gift of faith. The Psalm for today contains the words, “*What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.*” The words of the Psalm pose a question for each of us: “What can we return to God for all of God’s benefits to us?” How do we respond to the love and grace of God in our lives?

In Peter’s speech in Acts, Peter says “*Repent, and be baptized every one of you.*” That little word “repent” is from the Greek word “*metanoia*,” which means to change one’s mind, to change the direction of one’s thinking. “*Metanoia*” encourages us to be open to walking in the direction that Christ points us toward. When our hearts burn within us we realize that Christ is already with us. The funny thing about the road to Emmaus is that the travelers did not expect an event to happen that would reveal Christ to them. Are we open to the presence of Christ on our journeys?

All of us want life to get back to “normal” because “normal” is what we know. We may fear the road we are on now, because we don’t know where it will lead. We long to go back to the way things were. We may even be tempted to “get back to normal” before it is truly safe to do so. Though we would like to go back to a past we know, we also realize we are walking toward a new future. Just as the two travelers walked toward Emmaus - toward an encounter with the risen Christ – we are also journeying toward a future where Christ will also be present with us. True repentance, “*metanoia*” means being open to change knowing that Christ will transform us, and our journey.

Though we long for the road that is known to us, in reality we are always walking into the unknown. *Metanoia* means realizing that we are always walking by faith, and that Christ is always the unknown stranger walking with us. *Metanoia* means changing our direction from fear to hope. “*What shall I return to the Lord for all his benefits to me?*” The words of the Psalmist are helpful because they open the meaning of Easter for us: How is Christ transforming me on my journey to live into his presence today? How will I respond to this gift?

We are not alone. We continue on our journeys during this time of pandemic trusting in the risen Christ and seeking to help others. The risen Christ walks with us on our “Emmaus roads” of doubt and fear promising moments of Easter resurrection. Each day is an opportunity to return to the Lord with thanksgiving! Amen.