

“Heart-Burning Encounters”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Second Sunday of Easter
Edina Morningside Community Church; April 23, 2017

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them 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.

Just over a week ago, I gathered with other faith leaders at a rally to support Planned Parenthood. For all the hype about one hot-button issue with Planned Parenthood, I recognize that their clinics largely provide *other* affordable health care services to millions of low-income folks and people of color around the country. So my colleagues and I showed up for a few minutes, led a few songs, said a prayer and encouraged those keeping vigil throughout the day. This rally gathered to provide a counter-voice to an annual Good Friday protest organized by the Catholic church. There we were, two masses of people in pink hats and monk robes, marching past one another in adjacent circles with competing sound systems and police officers keeping us apart.

When my colleagues and I finished with our time at the mic, a man came walking over from the other side and asked to speak with us. He introduced himself as Jack. I remember because I was tempted to say, “Hi Jack”, and that is precisely what he did. He asked how faith leaders could be in support of Planned Parenthood, but it soon became clear that he was there to talk and not to listen. We engaged him for a while, trying to connect on shared faith values since he was a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor. But our differences in theology and worldview were so great that he felt the need to plead for our conversion, including in what I thought was a closing prayer for grace and charity in the face of strife. I give Jack credit for coming over and starting a conversation, but his “sneak-a-preach” prayer and blindness to the

possibilities of faithful dissent left me unsettled. In the days afterward, I've returned to that conversation in my mind, dwelling on all the things I wish I had said, crafting my own scripturally solid, hypocrisy-piercing, and self-righteous replies. You see, fisted minds exist on all sides of our cultural divides.

Compare that to another conversation, an ongoing dialogue between former Republican Minnesota governor Al Quie and African-American activist Robin Hickman. He is forty years older than she, and they're divided by race, gender and political party as well. Nevertheless, they have struck up a friendship that brings them together weekly to laugh, love, and share with each other the trials and triumphs of life. They were profiled in [a Star Tribune article](#) last September, which describes one of their conversations over sausage and eggs at Perkins. It began with prayer, since he is a lifelong Lutheran and she comes from a Pentecostal, Methodist background. They bond over this spiritual connection, which has helped them also recognize common passions for prison reform and eliminating racial disparities in Minnesota. Governor Quie says, "Even with tough issues, if you use a faith lens, there can be no hard feelings." He adds, "We approach this table in the spirit of listening and loving...then we carry our fellowship out into the world." For her part, Robin Hickman believes that other progressives could follow this model of befriending someone with whom they disagree. She says, "I can be disheartened and weary, but when I'm driving over, I anticipate blessings that will come from our time together." "I ask progressive folks, 'Who is in your network of friends who isn't like you?' The only way we can understand each other is to have a relationship with each other." "That's where everything starts."

Which of these two encounters do you suppose is more faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ? It wasn't breakfast at Perkins, but otherwise that conversation on the road and the meal at Emmaus sounds more like the second conversation than the first. This biblical story happens immediately after the Easter reading from last week—it begins with the very next verse. In this gospel, we are still on the day of Easter. We encounter two disciples, caught up in hearsay about this Jesus, and what's become of him. They don't know what's become of their leader, Messiah and Savior. The risen Jesus comes alongside, but they're kept from recognizing him. Yet over the course of their conversation and their walking together, the strangers build a relationship across that blindedness. By the time they get to Emmaus and evening has come on, the two disciples are not ready to part ways with their new companion. They invite him in, set the table, and share a meal. Then—and only then—do they recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread. Then he disappears. "Were not our hearts burning within us?" they ask. They recognize within themselves an inward conviction that compels them outward, to faith in Jesus Christ. And by a power beyond themselves, they race back that night all seven miles to go tell the rest of the disciples.

Over the course of this encounter, the presence of Jesus Christ moves these disciples from hearsay and heartbreak to hospitality and hope. Christ is manifest among them not so much in grand spectacle, but in conversation, in hospitality, and in the making-known. Not even in the intellectual conversation on the road—that wasn't enough. Recognition of Christ starts to happen in the breaking of the bread, and table sharing together.

You and I know we need this sort of uncommon conversation today. It's what we tried to do in the church though a conversation drive we had last fall into the spring, trying to be an alternate voice to the divisions that are more than evident outside. It seems like partisan bickering is all we hear today. Even science and the climate have become political, the subject of marches. In light of so much division in the world, I'm convinced that congregations like ours need to be the sort of places where eye-opening, heart-burning encounters take place. Where we EXPECT to encounter difference—with all its challenges—in the pew with us or across the aisle. Where we expect to encounter someone who doesn't share our points of view, but we stay together because we encounter the mystery of Christ in this coming-together. It's not always easy—sometimes it's heartburn in a literal sense, like I had with Jack—dwelling on and perseverating on that conversation more than I should have. Yet sometimes we experience in the frission

of two coming together to become more than any are by themselves—we experience the presence of the risen Christ.

This place, and other places like it, are spaces of grace in the middle of a divided and fractured world. Where can we find in the breaking of bread—at the communion table, over coffee hour, over the omelets at the EarthWorks breakfast yesterday morning—where can we find spaces of grace to break bread together and recognize the risen Christ in each other? We are nourished in those ways, and so many others that don't involve literal food, nourished here with the courage to seek God in the presence of the other, and carry that into the world. When we run from this place—not back to Jerusalem maybe, but back to our workplaces, back to our families, back to the other places of conflict and strife that are our reality in other times of the week. When we walk down the aisle and out the door—when we gather as the Annual Meeting—when we baptize or welcome new members in a couple weeks—when we boldly proclaim that “All are Welcome”—we do so with faith that the Risen Christ will manifest alongside us, made known in the breaking of the physical and the spiritual bread. Alleluia, and amen!