

“Where Two or Three Are Gathered”

Reverend Bill Gause

Overbrook Presbyterian Church

2nd Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-6 (The Message)

¹⁻²So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

³I’m speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it’s important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

⁴⁻⁶In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we’re talking about is Christ’s body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn’t amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ’s body, let’s just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren’t.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV)

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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?” ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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.” ²⁵Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?” ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



Sermon: “Where Two or Three Are Gathered”

On the road to Emmaus, two of Jesus followers encounter the risen Jesus but do not recognize him. As they walk, they talk and the two tell Jesus all about what has happened recently in Jerusalem. Jesus then explains those events in light of Old Testament scriptures and prophecies. Still not recognizing him, the two invite Jesus to stay with them in their home

for the night and to eat with them. In the breaking of bread at dinner, they finally recognize him as the Christ. But then he disappears.

I always wonder how in the world they did not recognize Jesus? They supposedly knew him but didn't even recognize his voice or his appearance while spending what appears to be hours walking and talking with him. When Mary and I watch animated movies, we usually try to figure out who is doing the voices. Mary is really good at it. There's usually something familiar about a voice that gives away who is speaking. So surely as these two walked with Jesus, there were familiar mannerisms, a voice inflection, an oft used idiom. But according to Luke, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Even though they walked with him, they couldn't see him.

It is only in the breaking of bread that their eyes are opened. And while it would have been just an evening meal and not an act of worship, the language Luke uses is definitely reminiscent of our own celebration of the Lords Supper: "took," "blessed," "broke," "gave;" these are the words of the sacrament and so we remember that in the acts of worship and in the celebration of the supper and baptism we encounter our risen savior.

But one of the little details of this story that always intrigues me is that by the time the two travelers first meet Jesus, they have already heard about the empty tomb. They know the women found the tomb empty and that angels were reported to have told them that Jesus was alive. And that some others went to see for themselves and while they *did* find the tomb empty, they *did not* see Jesus. The travelers have already heard all of this

So, they are not completely clueless as to what happened that Easter morning. But this news has not made the two travelers joyful. To the contrary. Luke tells us they look sad. The news has not affected them. They are trudging home in defeat.

Ever been to see your favorite team play and they just get blown out? A lopsided defeat is never much fun. You don't want to stick around for the ending. You don't want to tailgate after the game. You just want it to all be over. And then there's that long walk to the parking lot, and what feels like hours sitting in traffic. And you just want to go home. It's the same feeling you get after a poor interview when you know you aren't getting the job. Or when you work really hard for something that doesn't pan out. You just want to be done.

That's where these two travelers are. They're not sticking around Jerusalem any longer. There's nothing more to see there. They are headed home to nurse their dashed hopes.

That's where they are at the beginning of the story. But by the end, they're tearing back toward Jerusalem, eagerly running the seven miles, after dark, to tell their friends the good news. What happened? It wasn't news of the tomb that sent them running. They had already heard that news and in fact, *they* were the ones telling Jesus about it on the road. No, what sent them tearing back toward Jerusalem was what they had just *experienced*.

Author Clarence Day tells a story of two bibliophiles who died and went to heaven. But when they got there, they went immediately to the library and began to read all the books they could about heaven. They never took the time to explore their celestial surroundings but chose instead to *read* about them. They could learn more information, faster that way, you see. But, writes Day, "Information is pretty thin stuff, unless mixed with experience."¹

You see, you can hear a story all you want, but until you experience it for yourself, that story may never really be true to you. That's is the core of what it means to be a teenager. I say that as a parent *and* as a former teenager. Our parents told us. They warned us. But we didn't believe them until we saw for ourselves. That hot stove? Gotta' touch it. That speed limit? Gotta' break it. That weird fashion trend that they told us we'd regret seeing in photo's years later? Gotta' embrace it.

There are some things you just can't really understand until you experience them: true love, heartbreak, being a parent, growing old, and working retail.

As a college student, I spent two summers selling clothes in the men's section of Belk's Department Store. One of my main tasks was refolding the clothes and straightening shelves. One day my mother was in the store and she unfolded a shirt,

looked at it and then tossed it back on the pile. When I complained, she said, and I quote: “Oh they have people here that are paid to do that.” To which I replied, “Yeah, me! Please stop making my job harder!”

Now, I had done that same thing once or twice myself. But I’d never understood how much work I was creating for someone else until I was the one doing that work. To this day, I can’t shop in a clothing store without refolding everything I pick up and putting it back on the shelf neatly.

When you experience a thing; when it affects you personally, it tends to stick a little better; the lesson learned is a little more powerful. And I believe that is true of the gospel, as well. You see, those first disciples were certainly affected by the news they received, but they were absolutely changed by their experience of the risen Christ.

But those experiences of Christ are not limited to disciples in first century Palestine. Author Sara Miles has written of her own modern, life-changing experience of Christ. Raised an atheist, for 46 years, she had lived what she calls “a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades.” And then one day, “for no earthly reason, she wandered into a church,” ate a piece of bread, drank a sip of wine, and was changed. She had not wanted to become a Christian. It just happened. In her book *Jesus Freak*, she writes this:

“I came late to Christianity, knocked upside down by a midlife conversion centered around a literal chunk of bread. The immediacy of my conversion experience left me perhaps freakily convinced of the presence of Jesus around me. I hadn’t figured out a neat set of “beliefs” but discovered a force blowing uncontrollably through the world.

“Eating Jesus cracked open my world and made me hunger to keep sharing food with other people. That desire took me to an altar, at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, where I helped break bread for holy communion, then to a food pantry that I set up around the same altar, where we gave away free groceries to anyone who showed up. From all over the city, poor people started to come every Friday to the church ... and like me, some of them stayed. Soon they began to feed and take care of each other, then run things, then start other pantries. It was my first experience of discovering that regular people could do Jesus’ work.”²

“Faith” she writes, “isn’t an argument, a catechism, a philosophical ‘proof.’ It is a lens, a way of experiencing life, and a willingness to act.”³

Her life wasn’t changed because of something she heard. Her life was changed because of something she experienced. Which is the story of Cleopas and his companion, too. The hearing didn’t affect them nearly so much as the experiencing. Walking with Jesus, being in his presence, breaking bread with him, those fundamental experiences changed them.

Of course, today, it might seem we are at a bit of a disadvantage. Jesus isn’t popping up on the road, manifesting as a physical presence to talk and bread break with us. So where do we experience him? At Pentecost, the church was born to be, by the power and presence of God’s holy Spirit, the physical manifestation of Christ in the world. The Apostle Paul calls church “The Body of Christ.” We experience Jesus in the lives of his followers; in one another, in the church.

Some would argue that the church has forgotten that; that we have become more interested in building buildings and bank accounts and membership rolls rather than in building disciples. And there is some truth to that, probably more than most of us are comfortable admitting.

And I know that some see church as a burden, as something that takes time away from other things they would rather do; as a less entertaining alternative to activities that are more fun and more exciting. And there may be some truth to that, too; more than most of us are comfortable admitting.

But it is here in the church, in “The Body of Christ,” that we encounter the living presence of God. No not, in this building or in the pews, but in these people and in this community. Jesus told his disciples “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”⁴ When we come together in response to the Holy Spirit’s invitation; when we gather to give of ourselves in worship to God, then we are in the presence of Jesus. When we listen to one another’s stories, not just share who *I am*, but really learn who *they are*; when we support one another and learn that we can lean on one another when times are hard, then we are in the presence of Jesus.

You see, that is one of the truly great gifts that God has given us: each other. There is of course a deep challenge in that. If others who are hungry for Christ do not experience him in us, where will they? That's a tremendous responsibility to carry.

But there is also comfort here, because God has not abandoned us to be alone, to figure out this life thing and this discipleship thing for ourselves. God knew that life on this earth, for all its blessings and beauty, would still be hard and that we, in our infinite capacity to mess things up, would inevitably make it harder. But here in the church we experience the depth and breadth of God's love; here we experience the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ; here we feel the very presence and power of God's Holy Spirit.

In the breaking of bread, in the splashing of water, in the Word read and sung and proclaimed; in the love of God received and given, openly and generously; In the faces of others of God's imperfect children, in the warmth of an embrace, in the peace of someone else understanding our own struggles.

I remember once when I asked a member of this congregation why she was a part of this church, her answer stuck with me. She said *"It's like a good pair of shoes. When you put them on, and they fit and they just feel right. That's what I've found here."*

We encounter Christ in the lives of the people who know him.

Cleopas and his companion knew that Jesus was alive, yet they did see him, even though he stood right in front of them. We too, know that Jesus is alive, and if we are looking to see his face and listening for his voice, we will certainly find him here, in his church, among those who are also a part of his body. And for that we give thanks.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Day, Clarence. "The Three Tigers." *The Crow's Nest*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1921, p. 3.

² Miles, Sara. *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*. Canterbury Press, 2012, p. xi

³ Miles, Sara. *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*. Ballantine Books, 2008, p. xvi

⁴ Matthew 18:20, NRSV