

Texts: Acts 2:36-41, Luke 24:13-35

We can never safely assume that we are all in same place, even at the happiest of occasions. At a wedding, as all eyes focus on the happy couple, someone may feel the emptiness of not having a partner to love. Another feels sadness rise about their spouse who is gone. Others are troubled about the disruption coming into the family as these two lives become one. In every gathering, I try to be aware that there will be persons who are hurting, even when the setting points to joy and celebration.

On Easter Day, the brightest of all days, two of Jesus' disciples were getting out of town. They had to. It had become too much; too much to handle, too much idle waiting as the pain churn and deepened, too much personal control to surrender. They headed out of town.

Where do you go to check out, step away, leave the hassle and the heartbreak behind and strike out on a new path for a fresh start, and you determine the course? They headed to Emmaus. Luke is brilliant in telling the story: a literary artist is at work. Dejected, deflated, derailed, the two disciples vent along the way about all that has happened, as they walk away from everything that has happened.

(Jesus, the risen Christ, joins them on their dejection journey. But they didn't recognize him.) "What are you talking about?", the stranger asks. They stopped in their tracks, "their faces downcast". Brilliant!

"Haven't you heard? Are you the only one who doesn't know the stuff that's happened?"

"What stuff?"

And they recite the list of recent events; their hope eroding along the downward spiral. It's why their faces are downcast. "We had hoped Jesus of Nazareth would redeem Israel. He was crucified. The city of Jerusalem hasn't changed a bit, nothing's changed except Jesus was killed and our hopes for a better future were buried with him. Surprisingly, some women in our group went to the tomb: no body. Angels told them he is alive. But we've got no proof. No one has seen him. It's just too much. Too overwhelming, deeply disturbing, and way too painful. That's why we've got to go to Emmaus."

The stranger (Jesus) doesn't mince any words, doesn't cut them any slack. "You foolish people! Your dull minds keep you from believing all that the prophets talked about." (Side note: we need to watch that our dull minds - inattentive, easily distracted, overly cluttered - don't interfere with belief. Believing is key. The thoughts that course through our minds are like plants in a garden. We need to keep on top of the weeds, cultivate the good thoughts, feed their growth and development, foster fruitful outcomes within our minds. Be careful what gets in and how we sort through the content; it will become obvious in what we discard and what we hold onto. Believing is what matters.)

The stranger then interprets the scriptures, starting with Moses through the prophets, showing why the Christ had to go through everything they just described, leaving them downcast. He cultivates an alternate narrative, through scripture. Scriptural interpretation, applied to current happenings, is a sermon. Jesus preached to them, reversing their take on recent events into an upward spiral. Have you ever had that happen to you? A stranger, or a friend, reinterprets things you've been going through, reworks your take on what's been happening, in the light of scripture. And it becomes a wow: your eyes are opened through your what your ears hear.

They arrive where they were headed, Emmaus. Jesus acted as though he was going to keep going while they stopped. They invited him in; it was getting dark. "Stay with us." Reminder to us: we never know, beforehand, who we are welcoming in when we offer hospitality: Jesus just might show. He stayed with them.

On the road to Emmaus, the drama had been an exchange of words, some of which were words from scripture. At the Emmaus stopping point, it is the action, the verbs which Luke chooses to describe what the stranger/Jesus did next. Took, blessed, broke, gave. He sat at the table with them. "He took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him." The stopping point becomes a turning point.

Remember. Luke 9:16, with the crowd of five thousand: "He took the five loaves and the two fish, blessed them, and broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd." Remember Luke 22:19, three nights before: "After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them." Look: it's Jesus. Remember this is what Jesus does; risen, still the same. And then he vanished. But he left them believing: all that matters. More important than Jesus being physically present. He left them believing; and the world turned.

John writes at the end of his gospel that this is what it's all about. He writes how he could have written so much more, he could gone on and on about Jesus, things he did, things he said, the difference he made. "But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name." (John 20:31) Believing turns death to life.

Took, blessed, broke, gave. The familiar pattern, at table, with bread. Notice that in the Jesus-revealing sequence, broken is third, of four. Broken is not the last action. The breaking point is not it; not the end. Jesus is in the breaking, hands on in pain, fully engaged in suffering. Remember, there will be another act on the way. Give. Jesus gives, and our eyes are opened to recognize our Savior. The gift is life. It is you, Lord, it's been you, Lord, talking us through all that's going on. Opening our hearts to believe; he is the bread of life.

Famous preacher, Episcopal priest John Claypool once said: "God's other name is Surprise." Downcast, dejected, depleted, defeated. Wishing to be anywhere else than where we find ourselves. Overwhelmed by tragedy, overcome with grief. Broken.

Wanting to be over it. throw in the towel. Who meets us there? Takes, blesses, breaks, gives. He clues us in. Healing he gives. Grace, amazingly, he gives. A circle of love, he gives. A hand to get us back on our feet, assurance that gets us through the night, and hope that awakens us to a new day: he gives. We know surprise; we believe in Jesus Christ.