

“Behold! It Came to Pass”

Luke 24:13-35 — The Third Sunday of Easter

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Let us remember that we are a community gathered together here to listen to what the Spirit teaches us through the Scriptures to form us to be God’s people. We do that with the ancient greeting: The Lord be with you! [R: And also with you.]

Let us pray: Triune God, enfold our hearts in your mysterious presence that we may respond to your love more truly, and open our eyes with faith that we may behold and receive your gracious gifts, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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When I was a little girl, the pastor’s sonorous timbre in reading Luke’s Christmas story for midnight worship — or even a child’s voice reciting the first verse of the text for the Lutheran school program — thrilled me when these portentous words were sounded: “And it came to pass.” I wish we could put those words back into modern translations of Luke’s Greek word *egeneto*; the phrase carries a weight, a summons to reflection, a conviction of God’s sovereignty that seem to be missing these days. Things don’t “come to pass” by accident. There is a divine hand behind them that brings them to being.

I especially wish we could put that phrase back into this Sunday’s text, Luke’s account of the two travelers to Emmaus on Easter evening, for at the beginning of verse 15 the Gospel writer seems to suggest with thrilling confidence that it was no “happenstance” that Jesus came near to the gloomy disciples and *was going* with them. I stress the phrase *was going* because the Greek word Luke uses is another one of his signature markers.

Ever since Luke 9:51, when Jesus “set his face to be going to Jerusalem” to die (a verse which Luke also began with “and it came to pass”), the Gospel writer has used the same Greek word as a drumbeat. Jesus was going, going, going... to fulfill the Triune purposes for our redemption. Now that Jesus has been raised by the Father, He continues the going, for now He leads the way into mission. After Pentecost, Luke will use the same word in Acts to describe the apostles in their going, going, going out from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria and the uttermost margins of the earth. Ah, let us go with Jesus (for He has come near to us first) and join in the going out to the world to spread the Good News of His reign!

But I get ahead of myself. I point out these signature words “and it came to pass” and “going” so that we don’t hear this text today out of over-familiarity. Right away Luke doesn’t want to let us read his account like the daily newspaper. The very beginning of the story says “Behold!”

Our new translations have softened this, too. We read something like “See” or “Look,” but those words don’t grab us by the shirt collar as Luke wants to do. There are a lot of things we see, but don’t really notice. So Luke shouts, “Wake up!” Don’t sleep through this, or your eyes, too, will be kept from recognizing who it is that walks with you!

We wonder: how could these two disciples not have perceived that it was Jesus butting into their conversation? Hadn't they been following Him very closely? No, that couldn't be it, for certainly they are immensely troubled and bewildered by His death. Probably their enormous grief, the dashing of all their hopes for freedom from Rome, their drastic confusion when everything had seemed so promising, their absolute certainty that Jesus had truly *died* contributed to their lack of vision. Or could there have been a new glory in Jesus? Luke leaves it vague — and so the text asks us, too: What prevents us from beholding?

What is happening in your life right now that dims your perception of God's hand at work in those very circumstances? What sorrows overwhelm you? What angers unsight you? What confusions disorient you? What griefs or bondages or fears blind us all?

Memorizing the text to proclaim it today gave me one special insight. I had never noticed before that Luke's account moves from one disciple answering Jesus to both of them. After Cleopas responded to Jesus' original question with a somewhat astonished, "Where have you been?" that you seem to be the only stranger left in the dark concerning the events in Jerusalem these days, Jesus' seemingly artless question, "What things," is followed with "They replied."

Did you notice my attempt to proclaim the next part of the text in two voices alternating — one sort of wistful and the other more cynical? Of course, you might hear the two disciples' answers in two different kinds of voices. But for now, imagine with me the scene. One speaker — might it have been a woman, perhaps Cleopas' wife? — seems to have been more optimistic, might not have had all her hopes dashed yet. She responds to Jesus' question with some wistfulness,

The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people... But we had hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel.... [and] 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. (Luke 24:19, 21a, 22-23)

But the other, let's say Cleopas, responds both to her comments and to Jesus' question with anger,

and how our chief priests and leaders handed Him over to be condemned to death and crucified Him... Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place [which seems to mean, "I aint seen nothin' yet!"].... [and] 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 [which almost sounds like, "yes, but when the *men* went — after all, you can't trust those foolish women"]. (24:20, 21b, 24)

Luke's irony is hilarious. The second speaker has just said, "but they did not see Him" when the next line rushes in, "Then *He* replied." The irony multiplies when Jesus calls them, "foolish... and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" Though Cleopas thought this stranger was naïve and left in the dark about events, now

it turns out that they are the muddled ones and really slow on the uptake. After all, the prophets had been offering clues for hundreds of years.

Why hadn't they heard? Why don't we notice all the Bible's hints? Obviously these two didn't know enough of the details. Perhaps in their attempt to escape the turmoil of Jerusalem they hadn't hung around long enough to hear everything the whole community of Jesus' followers knew by the time of their walk to Emmaus. Maybe they gave up on God too soon and were returning home disillusioned and mournful. Why didn't they — and why don't we — pay more attention to the Torah and the prophets to know the ways in which God works?

Perhaps I imagine these two tones of voice in the disciples because my own life is so often characterized by wishful thinking or despairing cynicism. How often I can't wait to see how things might develop and turn instead to grief, anger, mistrust, unbelief. Sometimes I'm merely nostalgic; sometimes, sarcastic; sometimes, hovering between both; usually, doubtful. As I prepare for a kidney transplant this summer I oscillate between various kinds of unbelief about God's good purposes and care. And what about you?

How much we need the whole Christian community to keep reminding us of the big picture, the grand story of God's eternal attention! How much we need all the details of that story so that we don't lose sight of the myriads of little, sometimes hidden ways that God works. Especially we dare not forget that the Scriptures make it very clear that weakness and suffering are included in God's sovereign way.

All of Luke's attention-getting motifs seem to point to this central focus of the Emmaus narrative: we fail to behold that Jesus is with us, we ignore the Jewish prophets and those in the Christian community who insightfully observe that God's ways of going lie often through suffering, and we don't understand Christ's death and resurrection because we find it impossible that God should *choose* to cause the Triune purposes to come to pass through affliction and annihilation.

Why are we so unwilling to have our Liberator suffer? Jesus asks, "Was it not *necessary* that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into His glory?" How could God rescue the entire cosmos unless Christ took all the world's pain into Himself? Only by means of the fullness of Trinitarian self-donation could human beings be rescued from our continual idolatries of self and stuff and our consequent resistances and rebellions.

Perhaps our most frequent rejections of God develop because we want a victorious deity in control of culture and of the circumstances in our lives. We have trouble accepting a Messiah who chooses to be a Suffering Servant; we really want a Savior who rescues us completely out of all our messes and makes everything come out totally right. We simply can't understand a Trinity who is so wild and strange; we seem to pray, "God, if you knew all the facts, I'm sure you'd do it my way!"

Especially we don't want a persecuted Redeemer because that means that following Jesus will involve us, too, in adversities. We really don't want to pay the price of loving our neighbors, much less loving our enemies. We'd rather wield violence than absorb it into ourselves. We are thoroughly noninterested in the kind of complete self-donation that Jesus exhibited (and in which the Father and Spirit share).

How can we be formed into such a way of life? Jesus gives us three crucial aids to formation in the rest of today's Gospel story. The first is His follow-up to the question of whether it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and only then and

thereby to enter into His glory. Luke tells us, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them the things about Himself in all the scriptures.” Oh, I wish I could have heard that conversation! Every time I see paintings or sculptures of that roadtalk I thirst to have been there.

But we can have almost the same conversation each day now as we spend time meditating on the Scriptures, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance. We can hear regularly in the sacred texts how *YHWH* kept suffering for the sake of Israel, how often biblical history reveals a holy God who takes justified wrath into the divine self in order to give the people incentive and time for repentance, how the *LORD* warned believers through Torah and prophets and epistle writers against idolatries of self, Mammon, power, and violence.

The second gift the last half of the Gospel text offers us today is that Jesus not only *goes* with us; He also *stays* with us! When the two disciples arrived at their destination and Jesus seemed to be going on, they “urged Him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us...’” And Luke continues with wondrous simplicity, “So He went in to stay with them.”

I can’t even begin to fathom how much the Trinity must love to be invited to stay with us. Certainly we love it when those we cherish express yearning to be with us more. Have we asked God lately? Even as I was writing this sermon, I realized I haven’t. Yes, there are Bible reflection times, prayers at meals, other times of prayer, but has my heart really been ignited to “burning within” me lately — as, just before hastening back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples, those two Emmaus walkers described their experience of Jesus’ conversation with them? Have I been so thrilled with Christ’s living presence that I have rushed to tell others about it?

That is one of the reasons that I need so much our regular Sunday morning worship together. Gathering here to sing with all you saints and hearing the Scriptures in Bible readings and liturgy remind me richly of God’s presence in our midst. This time sets my heart on fire — and as we go out from this place back into the various ministries of our daily lives, we yearn more deeply for Jesus and the Father and the Spirit to stay with us.

We are especially enkindled here when we join at the table of the Lord to partake in/of His body and blood, His living presence among us. This was the third gift of our Gospel text, for as the mysterious stranger took bread, blessed, and broke it at their Emmaus dinner table the disciples were surprised to discern finally the resurrected Christ. Are our eyes opened, too, to recognize who is our Host when we come to this table?

What a glorious mystery it is that the Emmaus disciples, and all God’s saints throughout time and space, and God Himself are gathered here with us when we celebrate our Lord’s Supper! May we today receive the marvelous mystery of Christ’s resurrected presence and His Spirit’s empowering life as we tangibly savor God’s goodness in this meal of remembrance, this foretaste of the future kingdom feast. When we participate in this gift, we declare Jesus’ death until He comes again, and we are invested with His Easter life to join in His suffering for the sake of our wounded and forsaken brothers and sisters throughout the world.

Can you visualize the speed with which Cleopas and his companion raced back to Jerusalem — brimming over with such Good News to propel their feet? Can you picture the holy hilarity as those in Jerusalem acclaim, “the Lord has risen indeed, and He has appeared to Simon!” and the two from Emmaus tell of the mysterious stranger’s

roadwide seminar on the Scriptures and of His mindboggling disclosure of Himself in the breaking of bread?

Momentarily He will appear to them all and reveal His embodied resurrection life by eating fish and letting them see His wounds and handle His flesh and bones. But right now all that matters is this exuberant and communal Joy: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and teaches, nurtures us!

It wasn't just wishful thinking that Jesus was a mighty prophet, Israel's Redeemer, God's Messiah; it wasn't foolishness that women believed angels who said He was alive. And no cynicism is appropriate: it wasn't out of God's character that Jesus should suffer at the hands of chief priests and leaders who handed Him over to be condemned to death and crucified Him; it wasn't out of God's purposes that not till the third day did Jesus rise; it wasn't ultimately catastrophic that disciples hadn't at first believed — Jesus still cherished them so much that He walked with them and revealed Himself to them.

Behold! Jesus is going, going, going with us, too! Celebrate that He stays with us in the Word, the community, in bread and wine! This has all come to pass by the Trinity's extraordinary grace!

But we will lose sight of what Good News this all is if we can't place ourselves into the gloom of those Emmaus disciples as they walked away from the city of their anguish — knowing only that all their hopes were dashed — and thereby we can't behold the immense mystery and glory of Christ's resurrection and living presence. If we don't want a Messiah tortured and executed, as well as raised by the Father, we can't be truly delivered from ourselves and transformed by the Spirit into the same sort of self-sacrifice and willingness to suffer for the sake of others, especially those who still dwell in the darkness of despair and death. Only in self-donating death do we discover the immense mystery of resurrection life — Christ's and our own. Only in the humility of a spirit willing to accept the ways God works in the world can we see how God's purposes always come to pass.

Behold! Christ who died is risen and staying in our midst. All that God has promised in the Scriptures concerning the Messiah has come to pass. Let us be going, going, going to tell everybody else.