

“Burning Hearts and Opened Eyes”

May 3, 2020

Heart of the Matter series – 4th Sunday of Easter – Livestream

Ivan and I went to London in 2008 when his brother lived and worked there. On our trip, we visited the National Gallery. We saw many great works of art, but one of them stood out to me.

SHOW SLIDE. It was called “The Supper at Emmaus” painted by Michelangelo Caravaggio in 1601. It made such an impression on me because of the expression on the travelers’ faces. One description of the painting said this: “The intensity of the emotions of Christ’s disciples is conveyed by their gestures and expression. The viewer, too, is made to feel a participant in the event.” And you notice that there’s a place at the table for the person looking at the painting.

The disciples in the painting are surprised. One of them has his hands on the arms of his chair as if he’s ready to jump out of it! It’s intense and emotional. I was drawn to this painting because it invited me to sit at the table with Jesus and these two disciples – to have one of those “burning heart experiences” – that spiritual high that happens when God comes to us in a new way and when we simply “get it.”

This encounter on the road to Emmaus is both powerful and beloved. Maybe it’s because we truly do feel part of the story. Travelers walking down a road - a seven-mile trip on a dusty path, talking on the way about all that they had seen in the past couple of days. It had been so much—and so hard! The one they had hope in was gone. They were losing all hope.

They walked, without a goal in mind, feeling lost. Jesus had given them what they didn’t have—renewed energy and new possibilities. They had hoped he was the One. His ministry had changed them. But they had lost him, too. Their dreams of new life were fading fast.

This part of the resurrection account in Luke is so powerful because we can relate. We know that road well. We’ve been walking to Emmaus anytime we’ve lost something or someone, and it changes us. It grieves us. We wonder: *What’s the meaning of all this? I don’t get it. How do I make sense out of this confusion?*

We can relate to feeling disappointed and disillusioned. Certainly in these days we’ve felt sadness because of shutdowns and uncertainty about the future, cancelled plans, separation from loved ones, and tragedy for people facing the virus and their caregivers. I think of my colleagues who work in chaplaincy caring for people who are dying and their families.

So we can relate to what these two travelers are feeling, but the Emmaus story also invites us to anticipate when Jesus will reveal himself. We're waiting for the surprise. Our United Methodist Church even created a spiritual movement called the Walk to Emmaus designed to help people commit their lives to Jesus Christ and renew their commitments. Some of you have experienced that and have been blessed by it.

Emmaus is a "heart-warming experience" - or more accurately, the disciples say that their hearts were burning as they talked to Jesus on the road! These kinds of moments are important in our Methodist heritage. John Wesley, who began the Methodist movement in the 1700's, shared his own experience of a burning heart. It happened to him when he wasn't expecting it. He went to a Bible study with a few friends after they convinced him to go. That night, he heard words about Paul's Letter to the Romans, and he was forever changed. He got it – that Jesus loved him and had died for him! So burning hearts are part of our tradition. And maybe you can point to one big moment or many little moments like that.

And Scripture is filled with "burning heart" moments. Last week, we read a part of Peter's sermon in Acts 2. Today, in First Peter, a letter to the early church, we hear the appeal to love one another deeply and earnestly because of the resurrection of Jesus. God's love lasts, and our call to love one another doesn't end either. Burning hearts are a witness of God's love.

We have a part to play in God's design – in the story of resurrection. We don't live life the same way anymore. We act and do something. The Holy Spirit moves us to examine our lives and seek to follow God every day. Just like those whom Jesus joined on the road to Emmaus, we see differently. Our eyes are opened to the joy of love that lasts forever. And maybe it's like this sign: **SHOW SLIDE** - This is the sign you've been looking for.

And our eyes are opened to the things that we need to see more clearly in order to follow Jesus. In seeing God's love for us, we also see God's love for others. And we become more aware of evil, injustice, and oppression that exist in our world. As we live through this global pandemic, we know that we're all in the same storm – everyone is affected, but it's not the same boat – it's not the same for everyone. And we have to be honest about that.

I pray that our hearts burn with a passion for justice and peace – and our eyes see the realities that we don't always want to see – racism, xenophobia, privilege, and prejudice – both personal and systemic. We know that this virus is affecting those who are vulnerable because of lack of adequate healthcare or because of poverty at a higher rate. What does that mean for us as people of faith? In this moment, God calls us to see

the joy of resurrection – and the call of resurrection – to be clear that hope is for everyone – not just a few.

Scripture draws us into matters of the heart – how we’re challenged and “cut to the heart” when we hear God speaking clearly and strongly to us, telling us to make a change - and how we’re drawn to Jesus when he comes to us even unexpectedly and mysteriously and miraculously.

Over the last month as we’ve sheltered at home, our table has been used a lot more than usual for a lot more meals together. It’s an intimate thing to share a meal. It’s time to spend together, to talk, to share. Hopefully our tables are places where we love each other the best we can. We know the early church knew the power of breaking bread together as a sign of the love of Christ.

Jesus came back to disciples who were disillusioned and upset. Their hopes about who Jesus was and what he had come to do had been crushed – they truly thought that he had come to redeem Israel and to set the people free from Roman rule. Even though these two travelers weren’t in the inner circle, they invested in Jesus. Now he was dead along with their dreams!

When they sat together, when he blessed and broke the bread, their eyes opened. What they thought was true – hopelessness and despair – was transformed into pure joy and new life! And even after Jesus revealed himself to the disciples around the table, it didn’t stop there. Those disciples went out and shared the experience.

I invite you to see this video that shares a beautiful story of a special birthday gift – a gift that truly opened a man’s eyes in a new way! **SHOW MEDIA**

For this man, seeing color was a whole new way to see! And that’s a great way to describe what it means to see our lives, our relationships, our community, and our world in a whole new way! All throughout his ministry, it was at meals – at the table with others - where Jesus revealed the depth of his love – and the power of his love to overcome death.

As we gather today, even though we’re not in the same space, we remember his message was and is unconditional love. It’s that love that grounds our faith. It’s that love that gives us burning hearts and moves us to seek justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God in prayer. It’s that love that gives us hope for how God is at work even in the most difficult times – always surprising us by showing up even in a simple meal shared at a table. It’s that love that we’re called to live in and share boldly – always seeking justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Invite you to sing “Open Our Eyes, Lord” as we prayer together...