

Easter 3. Acts 2: 14a, 36-47; Psalm 116: 10-17; 1 Peter 1: 17-23; Luke 24: 13-35  
St. Augustine's, Freeland. April 30, 2017 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Of all the stories of the various disciples' encounters with the resurrected Jesus, the story of the journey to Emmaus is the one I love the most. There is something about it that resonates in a very profound way – a “ring of truth” way. After all, doesn't it capture the sense of tremendous disappointment that anyone who knew and trusted Jesus must have felt after his sudden execution? The power of this story is in two disciples who decide to walk away from it all and go home, and what happens to them

Journeying. That's a central theme of this story, and it's what makes it so compelling: this is a story of the journey away from community, of the redemption of loss, of the re-discovery of faith, and, perhaps most powerfully, of an encounter with that mysterious, holy “other” that in Jesus becomes so real, personal, present that in that moment it transformed two individuals' lives.

It begins gently in a sorrow and loneliness that has two friends seemingly traveling together but actually profoundly apart – separated by a wall from each other because they've just become *former* disciples. Having experienced the highs and lows of the Last Week, having discovered to their horror that their teacher has been crucified, has died, then been buried – a terminal story if ever there was one – they have, decided to leave it all behind them. That's in spite of having heard stories about his re-appearing,. ***Their anguish and sense of loss will not allow them to hope.*** They choose to classify the re-appearance stories as tall-tales, too fantastic to be real, and they opt, instead, to become former disciples. They simply go home.

And then comes this stranger – his appearance so transformed that he's unrecognizable to them. And he asks two simple questions: “What were you discussing?” and “what things happened?” Those two questions are invitations that gave these weary, heart-aching travelers permission to open up about their grief, their sense of loss, their distractedness, their lost-ness, and then permission to reflect and open themselves up.

Those questions and that “listening ear” represent the moment when two individuals began a new journey, one that offered the possibility of a new community.

But what sort of community? This stranger's gentle response is to offer a reflection based on scripture...a sort of “connect-the-dots” bible study that nudges them in what is for us the obvious direction but is for them – so lost in pain and grief – anything but clear.

As the conversation continues, there's an increasing sense of excitement that eddies like a gentle undercurrent, tugging at this couple. They start getting over their sorrow without noticing it, they begin feeling excitement without being aware of it. That's so human! Sometimes it's only at the end of the journey do we recognize that we have been changed, been moved in a different direction, mysteriously energized, almost ambushed by joy. Why? Because grief is a hard taskmaster that denies the possibility of hope and seeks to hide the possibility of joy.

I wonder how often we find ourselves in a place in our journeys where – without realizing it – we’ve allowed ourselves to become *former* disciples? One of the learnings in this wonderful story is how they stop being *former* disciples.

The process begins with studying scripture. As they later reflect, it was in hearing scripture – and hearing it from this mysterious stranger, that their “hearts burned within [them]. The isolationist walls are coming down; the shining “son” has begun to melt the ice.

Words are not enough for this process, though. The transformational moment is in an action, when bread was taken and broken, and shared.

All the meals they had shared with Jesus must have come back to them in that moment. Not just the bread broken but who broke it; not just the bread shared but who it was shared with – everyone. Those meals offered a vision of a new community where all were welcome, all were equal, all were free. **That dawning recognition must have stoked the fires of their burning hearts!** Of course it was Jesus who broke bread with them!

It is, I believe, in the two directions of the Emmaus road we find the story of our lives.

And we know both of those directions ourselves, of doubt and despair, and of hope and joy. There have been and will be those times of sadness and loss, or of depression or despondency, or of pain, when we wonder and we doubt, and our lives seem unconnected with this improbable story so long ago and so far away, except, perhaps, that with these two disciples we walk outside of faith in the long and lonely dusk of the soul. **AND** there will be the times when we see and share in the sudden, quiet joy and the gently-revealed glory so vividly encapsulated in this wonderful picture of realization and celebration. There will be times when we want to run back to the once-hollow Jerusalems of our lives in the middle of the night to share so wonderful a thing as the knowledge that if love has been crushed, if joy has been set aside, if peace has been surrendered to agony, ***all of these things have been redeemed, not just for Jesus and his disciples, but for us too.***

In hearing scripture and in the breaking and sharing of the bread we’re opened up by the divine mystery, and invited not so much to let go of our sorrows but to recognize that they don’t need to hold sway over our lives; invited to find in the community of the Risen One a new community where water is thicker than blood, to embrace the joy of belonging to God and to each other.

Today we have heard the scripture that talks of that transformation. Let us now move to the breaking and sharing of the bread that binds us into the community that has dropped the word “former” from its lexicon!