

April 30, 2017
The Third Sunday of Easter

"HEARTS ON FIRE"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 2:36-41 ~ 1 Peter 1:17-23 ~ Luke 24:13-35

I recently had a bone density test because several years ago I was diagnosed with osteoporosis. Of all the tests I have had in my life this one is my favorite ... you get to keep all your clothes on and you just lie there on a comfy pad. It's kind of like getting Xeroxed ... this big thing just passes over you and before you know it ... it's over. But this time I was a little anxious because I had just been measured and dealt a crushing blow. I was two inches shorter than I used to be...two inches shorter! I have to admit that the first thought I had was that I was going to have to readjust my weight based on my new height. I couldn't accept *that* so I made the technician measure me again ... and again ... but sure enough ...no matter how much I wanted it ... it was clear that I wasn't going to get those two inches back. It was also clear to me why this was the case when he showed me the scan ... my spine is curved right in the middle and when he measured the curve it is just about two inches. Always one prone to overreacting, I thought I was going to have a heart attack right then and there. I have had that feeling before ... when I taught my kids to drive and when I saw those big, fat snowflakes last Sunday!

Clearly I didn't have a heart attack, but I am going to remind you again that following Christ is not for the faint of heart! Each of our scriptures today deals in some way with the visceral experience of faith. The Jews ... gathered in Jerusalem from all points of the compass to celebrate Pentecost ... hear Peter tell the story of Jesus, and they are "*cut to the heart.*" "*What should we do?*" they ask him urgently, before he can even finish his sermon. Isn't *that* every pastor's dream! The Epistle of 1st Peter urges us to "*love one another deeply, from the heart,*" as if the connection between Christians should be more than casual acquaintance or loose association ... as if we were actually members of the same family with all the obligations and responsibilities which go with being related by blood. And in the gospel the risen Christ tells two disciples walking sadly to Emmaus, "*Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe.*" But later, when they recognize him and he disappears from sight, they say to one another, "*Didn't our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road?*"

Is this a report of something that happened ... or a parable of how things always happen for us as disciples of Christ? It is still the first day of the week, the first day of the new creation, only now sunset nears. And what a day it has been for Cleopas and his companion, two lesser known followers of Jesus. On Friday they saw Jesus die on the cross, and there *their* dreams died. On Saturday they learned where he was buried, and there *their* hopes were buried. But today they have heard a rumor of resurrection, and they don't know what to think. The women claim they have seen angels announcing Jesus is alive, but these men are accustomed to discounting the voices of women. Peter and John verify the tomb is empty, but what does that prove?

These two peripheral disciples of Jesus, walk in sadness and confusion, unable to trust a rumor that is just too good to be true. Why *is it* that we are so quick to believe rumors of scandal and tragedy, but cannot trust a rumor of resurrection, or believe good news as soon as we hear it?

A stranger joins them on the way. The story is told so that we know it is Jesus ... though they do not. Luke tells us simply "*their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*" What does that mean? They didn't recognize him because they were walking with heads down in sorrow rather than eyes lifted in hope? They didn't recognize him because they didn't expect to see him on their dusty road to Emmaus ... any more than we expect to see Jesus with us in our familiar daily ruts? They didn't recognize him because they were two lesser known followers who would never expect Jesus to appear to them, of all people? They didn't recognize him because his appearance had changed in some way... so that seeing him is now a matter of spiritual rather than material vision?

He asks them what they are discussing and they are amazed. "*Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?*" For goodness sake, it's the talk of the town. "*What things?*" Jesus asks. What is the news you have to share?

They have only bad news, about the One they had hoped might be the Messiah ... the One in whom they wanted to trust ... the One in whom they had placed the longings of centuries ... but then he was tried and crucified. And they share the rumor of resurrection which they clearly do not believe because they will trust only as far as their eyes can see. "What a bunch of dim bulbs!" Jesus chides. "What a bunch of slow-hearts!" Is he talking about their lack of faith ... or ours ... we who are still so easily disappointed and give up on God when life goes awry?

And then, Jesus opens the scripture to them and explains the necessity of the cross and resurrection ... how none of this was accidental, but the plan of God all along. Could Luke be telling us that the inspiration of the biblical authors by itself is not sufficient ... that the church needs the risen Christ to illumine the meaning of the text? That like faith, understanding scripture is not a head trip but a matter of the heart.

Still, they do not recognize him until they sit at table with him. Luke describes the scene almost sacramentally ... with clear eucharistic language already used in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper by the time Luke wrote his gospel ... and quite familiar to his audience: "*(Jesus) took bread, blessed it, and broke it.*" That is the "aha" moment. That is when they see who he is. John Claypool says that Jesus is revealed by his gratitude, as are all his followers. I think that is true, but I also think that what Luke wants to tell us is that the risen Christ is at the table with us whenever we share the sacred supper ... and that is when we recognize him ... that is where we see who he is.

And in that moment, he is gone. They say to each other: "*Didn't our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*" Like Moses, who was only allowed to see the glory of God after God had passed by, so we see the glory and recognize Christ in the aftermath. Our eyes are blinded by sorrow and our lack of faith in the moment of crisis ... but later we can see Christ was walking with us all along.

I have often served as a spiritual director on a three day retreat that is named “The Walk to Emmaus. “ Once, a man who was on the retreat stopped me during a break to talk with me about the experience I had shared of my father’s suicide. He wanted to let me know that I was not alone ... that his father had taken his life as well. It was not any easy conversation. We both wept. Yet, in the remembering there was a grace and a recognition. As we shared our stories we both spoke of the depression, despair, and self-loathing we had felt during those days, the lowest point of our lives. Yet, miraculously, looking back, we had both also experienced a grace which came from beyond us. God didn't throw us away. We recognized that we are under the mercy of a loving God who considers no one insignificant and brings us out of the pit. Looking back, we could both testify that Christ was with us in our journey through the darkness, even though we could not see him at the time, and we emerged with the light of Christ guiding us. But during that conversation we became aware that Christ was with us *right there ... right then ...* in that moment of heart to heart sharing. We recognized him and remembered the rumor of resurrection we had heard.

The disciples recognize him, and he disappears from sight, and that's when they remember: *"Didn't our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road?"* They are seized by a passion which drives them back to the disciples in Jerusalem to testify, to share their news, which is now nothing but good news.

All our scriptures today ... especially the story of the walk to Emmaus ... remind us that faith is a visceral experience. As Susan Andrews suggests:

They are about pounding hearts, wounded hearts and burning hearts. And they invite us to encounter the living Christ in the heart of who we are. Kathleen Norris and others remind us that "to believe" is not a matter of the mind but a matter of the heart. For what we "believe" is what we "give our heart to."

We're not talking about a mindless emotionalism here ... driven by the need for a weekly high ... confusing excitement for spirituality ... a feel-good faith which evaporates at the first sign of strain. But we *are* talking about a faith that is more than just in your head. Jesus Christ is not merely a good idea we choose to believe. He is a living presence who encounters us in our daily lives and sets our hearts on fire. And believing in Jesus means giving ourselves to being his disciple because we have been seized by someone greater ... someone who captures our minds and emotions and wills and imaginations. Being a Christian means living from the inside out ... not driven by external appearance ... but engaged with enthusiasm from the deepest center of your being. Enthusiasm is combination of two Greek words - *en theos* - the inward God.

As Marcus Borg suggests, whether this story of Luke's happened or not, who can say? But that it happens again and again, we can all attest ... even when we feel we are walking alone in despair, Jesus walks with us. It's a good word for us who live in this cynical, materialistic time and can't help being so infected by doubt that we disbelieve any good news we hear. More importantly, for those who are facing the darkness ... the pit ... life and death struggles with relationships ... health, or whatever challenge darkens your horizon like an approaching storm ... it is a good reminder that the risen Christ walks with you ... even if you do not see him ... even if you feel like a lesser known disciple not likely to be on his list of upcoming appearances.

Are you wrestling with your own demons? Look to the past and remember how he has brought you safe thus far. Look here and see Jesus illuminating the faces around you. Look at what some of our people are doing in their daily walks with the poor, the hungry, the incarcerated, the infirm and the lonely ... not because they *think* it is what Jesus would want done ... but because Christ is alive in their hearts and they give their hearts to his work. I'm telling you, here and there, now and then, suddenly you will see him among us as plain as the nose on your face, not with your eyes, but with your heart.

May we pray?

Living Savior, You meet us where we are that you might lead us where you wish. Walk with us wherever we walk. Open our ears to hear and understand your word. Open our eyes to see the opportunities we have to serve you. Open our hearts to your loving presence that we might be seized from within by the One from beyond who is risen indeed. Amen.