

Sermon

Grace, Mercy, and Peace from God and from our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I hope that this Sunday finds you with peace in your hearts that our ordeal might soon be over, that Spring's energy is blooming in your hearts, and that you feel hopeful, not only for yourselves, and your loved ones, but for our world, which is struggling so much under the strains of economic uncertainty, stressful news, and social distancing. Yesterday, I saw an enormous driveway chalk drawing of a smiley face almost 10 feet in diameter, with the word "Smile" in big letters across the face. I put it up as our banner photo on our church facebook page, because that's what I'm trying to do these days, be patient, flexible, and smile more.

We are now 6 weeks into these live-streamed services. I hope you have been fed in your hearts and minds and souls by these services. We have tried to make them feel similar to what you might expect on a normal Sunday morning, with a familiar rhythm to the service, familiar style of readings from scripture, and familiar hymns to sing. The idea has been not to distance ourselves from our tradition, but to reflect it clearly and boldly in our worship. And we have provided tools for you to use in your homes, the worship guides for each service, and the announcements bulletin for each Sunday, so that we keep up our flow of information.

Unfortunately, it's not the same as being able to gather together, and we all feel that. We are not able to greet each other before and after the service, we are not able to greet each other with the peace of Christ before communion, and of course, we are not able to have Holy Communion. This last indignity is particularly vexing to some of us, and depending on your personal piety and background, maybe not so much for others. But whether Holy communion is an important part of your personal piety, or not, it is the theological climax of our weekly order of worship, and it's importance to understanding the orthodox Christian faith cannot be overestimated.

Now those of you who have been tuning in for these last few weeks, you know that I've already covered this topic of why we are not having 'virtual communion'. For those who want to refresh your memory, you can go to our YouTube channel, "Lamb and Flag Ministries," and go to the service for Maundy Thursday, April 9th, and skip to the sermon. I won't rehearse that issue here. What I want to do here is place the topic of Holy Communion, and its place in the larger rhythm of our Sunday worship, in order to show

you how it is already reflected in today's Gospel text, the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. You could even say that the pattern that I want to draw out for you in this beloved text shows the three basic elements of the Christian life together. These are Testimony, scripture interpretation, and the breaking of the Bread. In the end, I hope we can all see a little more clearly the role these three practices play in our faith, and in the life of the church. I also hope that we will see more clearly how it is that the risen Jesus is with us, not just in theory, but also in word and deed through the unity of the fellowship of believers that Christ gathers around himself.

Our Gospel text for this morning is actually the second of three resurrection accounts in this last chapter in the Gospel of Luke. In the first account, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and some other women, all disciples and followers of Jesus, find an empty tomb and are met by two angels, who tell them that Jesus is raised from the dead. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angels ask. The women are instructed to go back and tell the rest of the disciples that Jesus is risen from the dead. These women become the first evangelists in the history of the church.

The second resurrection account in Luke is this morning's story of the two disciples, one who is named Cleopas, who are met by Jesus on the road as they travel from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Now we hear from Cleopas that the women from the first account made it back to the disciples, and were able to tell them what they had seen at the tomb. At the end of this account, when our two travelers have gone back to Jerusalem, we find out that the Lord has also appeared to Simon Peter.

The third story is the final resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples as a group. Jesus simply appears, all of a sudden, in their midst. This account includes Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit, and then we witness his ascension into Heaven.

So these three resurrection accounts, all in a row here in the last chapter of Luke, are full of testimony from different people about Jesus' resurrection. In the first account, the angels are the first to testify to the resurrection. Then, the women are sent back to the larger group of disciples to testify that Jesus is risen. In the second account, Cleopas and his comrade are sent back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples that they have seen the risen Lord, and they are told in return the testimony that Peter has seen

Jesus. And in the final account, Jesus comes to the group, who have now been reunited in Jerusalem, and testifies to his own resurrection.

Testimony is what the Christian tradition is built on, the testimony of angels, the testimony of the Lord himself, and the testimony of these women, of Peter, and of the larger group of disciples who were eyewitnesses on that first Easter Sunday.

Their testimony becomes the church's testimony, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. But it is not the fact of the resurrection alone that makes up the testimony, for there is specific content that is also repeated in each of these three resurrection accounts. This content helps put Jesus' death and resurrection into a context of fulfillment. In the first account, the angels remind the women of Jesus' own testimony about his death; "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then Jesus is with the two disciples in Emmaus and they tell him everything that happened in the recent past, about Jesus' own words and deeds, but also about his arrest and execution. Yes, that's the story, and as they stand there wide-eyed and blinking, Jesus declares, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Finally, when they are all gathered in Jerusalem and Jesus surprises them by mysteriously appearing in their midst, he repeats this information, that, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

The disciples are notoriously bad at understanding these prophecies, for Jesus has already told them on three separate occasions that all of this would happen to him, but they failed to understand. They are slow then to understand on Easter Sunday that the death of Jesus they witnessed, and the resurrection they are told about, are fulfillment of the teaching from scripture that Jesus gave them. First, the angels remind the women of this, then Jesus reviews all of this with Cleopas and his friend in Emmaus, when "he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets." Finally, Jesus teaches the entire group back in Jerusalem, as Luke says, "opening their minds to understand the scriptures,... that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

Luke is repeating all of this information in order to teach it and reinforce it. The testimony of the church is not simply that there was a man named Jesus who died and rose from the tomb. No, the testimony about Jesus' death and resurrection includes information that is crucial for its understanding, namely that Jesus' death and resurrection are fulfillment of certain promises in Jewish scripture. The tradition is that Jesus in fact died in a very specific way, one that is crucial for understanding who God is and also how God will achieve justice. In a way, Cleopas and his friend have the story almost correct. Their testimony about Jesus of Nazareth is ironically correct, that "he was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and [that] our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him." The fact that they do not yet have faith in the resurrection means that they were at least partly right after all, he was "the one to redeem Israel," but also that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

Thus we have testimony, and the interpretation of scripture, as the first of the two central elements of Christian life together. The second resurrection story in our Gospel lesson today bring these out, namely that faith is built on the testimony of others and anchored in certain parts of scripture, which must be interpreted carefully. But our third element of Christian life that appears in today's gospel text is this element of recognition in the breaking of the bread. As Jesus walks along with Cleopas and his friend on the road, they relay to him the testimony they've heard, and the experience of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion that has left them despondent and demoralized. As they walk, Jesus fills in these events with interpretation from scripture, and in such a way that Cleopas and his friend will exclaim to each other; "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" But we are not yet at full recognition. They still have not recognized Jesus as their lord and master. Lacking faith in the resurrection, they are not able to 'see' him clearly. He is still a man they met on the road, albeit a man who knows how to understand what happened to Jesus over the past weekend in terms of the history of the people of Israel.

But this experience with Jesus, including the conversation based on testimony, and the interpretation of scripture that Jesus provides, leads them to invite Jesus to stay with them. They still don't know who he is, but they want to be with him. And then, when they sit down to eat, their guest

lifts up the bread and blesses it before them, and suddenly, their eyes are opened. In what has already transpired on their walk with Jesus, they are very close to full faith. Their despair in his crucifixion, and their confusion about the testimony of the women they've heard, are turning towards faith as this man explains Jesus' death in terms of the scriptures. But now, when they watch him raise the bread they are about to eat, and hand it over to God for blessing, in essence acknowledging the gift of life that is from God, their recollection jumps back to the night in which he was betrayed, when he took bread, broke it and blessed it, and said, this is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me. This act of breaking the bread in blessing, before beginning to eat it, recalls another story in which Jesus blessed the bread that was served to the 5000 people, months before this.

Luke reports this story in chapter 9, when Jesus led the disciples away from the town of Bethsaida to teach them, and a large crowd followed them. Instead of sending them away, Jesus told his disciples to feed them. Not knowing how this was going to be possible, the disciples simply followed Jesus' instructions to gather what food they had and make the crowd sit down;... And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces."

Luke uses the same two verbs, blessed and broke, in both stories. It is a signature Jesus move, an act of simple reverence that gains all of its power from the context of belief in his authority and his identity. Jesus is Lord, and when the Lord blesses and breaks bread with you, you come to see him for who he is, the Lord and giver of life. The act opens the eyes of Cleopas and his friend, and the same ritual of breaking and blessing the bread has opened the eyes of faith in generations of believers down through the centuries to us. Do you want to see Jesus? Hear the testimony of his disciples; listen to the accounts of scripture that point to his lordship, and then see him in the breaking of the bread, for as he said to his disciples, so he now says to you, this is my body, handed over to death for your sake, and now raised incorruptible from the grave, so that you may not fear the grave and the power of death, but live life abundantly in faith.

And that is what we do as a church through time in our worship together. Generation after generation, faithful disciples who seek to follow the lord Jesus carefully listen to the testimony of other Christians, and read about the testimony of the earliest disciples found in scripture. Peter's sermon

recounted in our first reading this morning from the book of Acts is an excellent example of this. And after we listen to their testimony, and take to heart the testimony of scripture, we enter into the meal of Jesus' passion, the meal that visually retells in a simple ritual gesture the significance of what Jesus has done for us. Jesus has handed over his body to death, a death he didn't deserve, so that we might live. Alleluia! Saint Paul calls for believers to trust in this new life, initiated in our baptism into Christ's death, as he writes in his letter to the Romans, chapter 6, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

And now, because of this testimony, because of the scriptures, and because of the meal that grounds our interpretation, we might live a new life. We are removed from the place and space of despair, we are rescued from the experience of walking away from Jerusalem, of walking away from Jesus and his disciples, of walking away from death and resurrection, and instead, given faith to come back to the fold, come back to the testimony, come back to the scriptures, and come back to the meal. Faced with an uncertain future in a world that is in turmoil, uncertainty and death, we grab on to the testimony we've been given. In the face of this global pandemic, and the ways in which it is changing the way we must live our lives, we can grab onto the testimony of Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and the other women disciples, we can grab onto Peter's testimony, and that of Cleopas and the other disciples, and we take to heart the testimony of our own ancestors in the faith, as well as our testimony to each other, and we can start to believe again in the one holy catholic and apostolic church, we can acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and we can look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

In the testimony of the faithful generations of the church, and in the faithful interpretation of scripture, and in the faithful breaking of the bread, we see the touchstones of our life of faith. We may not be able to enjoy them all right now, particularly Holy Communion, but our faith rushes out to greet this good news, and we hold onto it, cherish it, grasp it till our dying day. In hope, we look forward to that time when with all the saints of God, we gather around the feast of heaven, when death and sin and injustice have been vanquished, and when the Lord who is our Lord, the giver of life, will break bread with us around his eternal table. Then, our testimony will find its fulfillment, and the accounts of scripture will echo in our ears. Christ will

be our all in all. May the peace of God, which passes all understanding
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.