

Third Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2011
Reverend Julio Cruz-Natal, Pastor
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1Peter 1:17-23, Luke 24:13-35

Going Back to Jerusalem

We call Thomas the incredulous because he would not believe that Jesus had resurrected. He wanted proof, he wanted to see, he wanted to be there, he wanted to touch; to perceive through his own senses. Which we said last week, it's not unusual at all as he was merely asking to be part of that wonderful event of the resurrection.

The thing is that Thomas is not alone. Don't chastise poor Thomas. He is just an example of what others were going through. The disciples didn't believe the women that came back from visiting Jesus' empty tomb on that first Easter morning. Luke says, right before our reading for today, the disciples thought theirs was an "idle tale", that they were making it up, that it was all nonsense. Peter, who did not want anyone else telling him about things but wanted to find out by himself, ran to the tomb. But he didn't see anything there but a bunch of linens. He didn't know what to think, much less what to believe. Most likely everybody else was on the same boat. They were having a hard time believing. Ironically, a few days earlier, they found it hard to believe that Jesus was dead. Now they were having an ever harder time believing that he was alive again. I wonder if that's one of those ironic human reactions to things. You know, to find good news more difficult to believe than bad news.

Take for example the disciples on their way to Emmaus. It is possible they were part of the inner circle of Jesus followers. Maybe even part of the twelve disciples (although the name Cleopas is not mentioned anywhere else) as it was to them the women went to tell about Jesus' resurrection. Nevertheless, in spite of the good news, the gospel says that they are now leaving Jerusalem. That fact is a tale in itself. It is as if they were saying "We are done in Jerusalem; there's nothing more to do here." They had come to celebrate the Passover with Jesus, but he is now dead. When you are expecting good things to happen and they don't, it is as if the rug is pulled from underneath your feet. You become pessimistic. You lose desire. That's when people abandon ship. Much like when Jesus was arrested. They leave. They quit. They flee.

Take notice of how Luke describes that scene on the way to Emmaus. They were talking about all that had happened. They probably went back more a week before when they entered Jerusalem. At that time everything was going well; they were in the pinnacle of their adventure. So, they must have wondered, how in the world did we go from the triumphal entrance in Jerusalem to the horrible death on the cross? How did it all end like that? Why did things unravel in such a way? The gospel reading says they were talking, but I think they were more likely scratching their heads trying to figure out what the heck

had gone so very wrong. In the middle of their bewilderment a stranger (Jesus) joined them. “What are you talking about?” the unrecognized Jesus asks. Looking “sad”—says the gospel—and I imagine puzzled as well, they respond: “Are you the only one who doesn’t know?” “What? Please tell me,” Jesus says. And so they retell the traumatic set of events. Which, by the way, makes me wonder, how would you tell the story of Jesus’ life? Difficult question to answer honestly since today we have the benefit of the written gospels. But what would you have said if you were one of those disciples? What would you have said about the great prophet? Would you have told about the enigmatic parables and the great teachings? Would you have recounted the amazing miracles? And then, would you have mentioned how everything came crashing to a halt when he was crucified? “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel...” There is so much sadness in that line; so much disappointment. We thought he was the one, but now he is dead. A once hopeful story that ends with irreversible hopelessness. We had hoped...

That’s where we find these two figures. A joyful past, a sad present, a hopeless future. The death of Jesus puts an end to all hope. So now they are leaving. They are going back to their old lives. Their plan likely is to pick things up where they left them three or so years before. Maybe they’ll get back their old jobs. Maybe their friends will still remember them. Who knows, maybe they are hoping their families will receive them back. Like that story Jesus told them about the father who welcomed back his son. I guess that’s the best they can hope for.

Now, we know the story has not actually ended there. If the death of Jesus took their breath out, the resurrection will bring back a new hope. But for that to happen they have to be able to see. They have to know. They have to realize. They have to recognize. They have to open their eyes. The resurrection is more than Jesus coming back to life. The resurrection is to be able to see what God can see. Do you remember when Jesus rebuked Peter for trying to keep him from going to Jerusalem? Jesus told Peter that he was not seeing the way God does. That’s certainly true about the cross. It is not only Jesus dying; it is God forgiving, redeeming, saving. And certainly that’s also true of the resurrection. It is not only a joyful happening. It is opportunity. It is a new beginning. It is God showing hope when and where we thought there was none.

Isn’t that why you come to the communion? Don’t you come to find God? When you extend your hands asking for bread, don’t you see Jesus saying “Here I am”? Can’t you recognize that we come to the table to encounter God? It is where our blindness ends. It is when we are able to see. It is a reason to continue. It is an event of restoration. It is an opportunity to come back, to go on, to follow through. When we think there’s nothing left to do, God says there is. “We had hoped that he was the one” said the disciple. And God says, “Yes, I am still the one. The one to bring redemption. The one to bring salvation. The one to bring hope. The one to give life. Those disciples retold the story of Jesus but only to the obscurity of the cross. The Eucharist, then, becomes the light by which things come into focus. When they realize that there’s more to the story than they had believed, they then return to Jerusalem. This time not with a hopeless perspective on things, but with a renewed hope on the things that God has done. In the same way we come to the

communion, sometimes hopeless, sometimes with a sense of guilt, always knowing that we need of God. When we leave the table, hopefully, we do so recognizing that it is God who is here. And then, seeing from that perspective, we can understand and see the way God has done. Amen.