



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE  
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 26, 2020  
ACTS 2:14a, 36-41; PSALM 116:1-3, 10-17; 1 PETER 1:17-23; LUKE 24:13-35

## SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS

This past month, as we moved through Holy Week and into the Easter season, I found myself remembering my pilgrimage to the Holy Land last January when Bishop Rickel led a group of clergy from our diocese, California, New Jersey, England and the Isle of Man. Some were newly ordained, and some were retired, but for most of us, it was our first trip to Israel/Palestine.

Our pilgrimage loosely followed the geography of Jesus' life and ministry. We began in the Galilee and visited gospel sites in Capernaum, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Tiberias. In Jerusalem, we walked the Via Dolorosa, the path that Jesus took to the cross. It was very moving for me to visit Magdala, the hometown of Mary Magdalene, on whose feast day I was ordained to the priesthood. It was especially meaningful as we walked among the ruins of

a first century synagogue that Jesus almost certainly visited.

And over the course of those days in the Holy Land, I experienced a growing and palpable sense of Jesus' presence. The beauty of the countryside, the lifelike murals and sculpture, the tender conversations with colleagues, and the traces of centuries of pilgrims brought to life the stories I had heard and studied for over fifty years.

Our last day began with a visit to Emmaus, the town where Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his companion after the Resurrection – our gospel reading today. It seemed fitting that our group of Jesus' disciples, 2000 years later, would share a final Eucharist together and depart for home from Emmaus. So, after breakfast, we left our hotel in the old city on foot, threading our way through the bustling streets and out the Jaffa Gate to the bus. The

hour-long drive from Jerusalem began with bumper-to-bumper traffic but soon gave way to rolling tan hills with spots of green.

There are actually four different places that claim to be Emmaus, at varying distances to Jerusalem. Our group went to Abu Ghosh, about seven miles west of Jerusalem, where a Benedictine monastery with a Crusader-era church and beautiful mosaics has been visited by pilgrims for almost 1000 years.

As we got closer to Emmaus, my thoughts turned to Jesus' disciples – the families of James, John, Peter, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary his mother, Mary Magdalene, and the other women at the foot of the cross. Because in the Holy Land, I experienced them not as characters in a story, but as my spiritual ancestors. The spiritual ancestors of all of us. I felt their presence, too, day after day, in the landscape and holy places we'd been.

And I wondered especially about the couple in our gospel today – Cleopas and his companion, thought by many scholars to be his wife. How on the day of the Resurrection, immediately after the women return from the tomb with the news it is empty, these two friends of Jesus leave Jerusalem in a hurry.

We know Jesus' followers are traumatized and afraid for their own lives. So maybe this couple has decided to return to their home in the country or maybe they're just getting

out of town. It's clear they're devastated, preoccupied with the horrible things they've witnessed, the betrayal by their religious leaders and Jesus' brutal death at the hands of Roman overlords.

When Jesus draws near (the same Greek word for the kingdom of heaven drawing near, by the way), Cleopas thinks that he's just a clueless stranger, so he and his companion pour out their story of grief. Coming to a stand-still, they give him the heart-breaking bottom line.

“We had hoped.” Past tense. “We had hoped he was the one who would redeem our people.”

But clearly that hope is gone. These disciples, who knew and had trusted the scriptural record of God's saving acts on behalf of Israel, had hoped that their lives would be part of that history, too. That the redeemer promised by the prophets, the one who would restore justice and turn all people's hearts to God, that redeemer would come in their time.

They had hoped. But they don't hope any more. James Martin writes that “we had hoped” might be the saddest words in the New Testament<sup>1</sup>. And at some point, or maybe several points in our lives, they are our words, too. We had hoped that this relationship would last. We had hoped our child would be healthy and care-free. We

had hoped we could say good-bye before our loved one died.

Like these disciples, we know what it is like to feel hope quashed, to feel cut off from God, excluded from a longed-for future.

So how do Cleopas and his companion go from a bereft couple trudging along the road to people filled with spiritual clarity and hearts burning with joy? How is their grief and fear so completely transformed into energy and conviction that they run back seven miles to rejoin their companions in Jerusalem? How do they become our spiritual ancestors?

It's not because they have special wisdom or power. Without exception, the gospel writers report that the first Christians' responses to the empty tomb and Jesus' appearances to them are fright, skepticism, and confusion<sup>2</sup>. They are not exemplary people – not yet. That comes later.

What comes first is their experience of the Risen Christ, who walks with them, blesses them, offers them God's peace, and sends them forth in his name. And that experience unfolds on its own timeline.

In their misery and distraction, Cleopas and his companion don't recognize Jesus. But Jesus walks with them, holding their grief and crushed hopes. And then he explains scripture to them, helping them to see that God's story is ongoing, not fixed in the past

with the patriarchs and matriarchs, but taking place in the present, gathering up Jesus' suffering and death and bringing something new and life-changing out of it.

I imagine that for those two, it is like a drink of cool water for a parched soul.

And then their eyes are fully opened at table. Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and shares it with them. "He is made known to them in the breaking of the bread." Maybe these disciples were there when the 5000 were fed. Maybe they were present at the last supper. We don't know. What we do know is that the familiar pattern of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing, wakes them up.

It's the pattern we practice here at the Eucharist and the pattern we can follow at home every time we sit down to a meal. The pattern that affirms for us that the Risen Christ is always present, offering sustenance and strength for the journey. And that love of God and love of neighbor are expressed in daily acts of gratitude and service.

When they encounter Jesus on the way to Emmaus, Cleopas and his friend are indelibly changed. They recognize the Holy One in their midst and they feel their hearts burning. The Greek words for this do not describe a gentle kindling, but a fierce, consuming fire. An unquenchable flame that fills them with energy and courage and

hope, so that they and all their descendants have proclaimed, “Christ is Risen!”

That same flame has passed from generation to generation and abides in you and in me as we respond, “The Lord is Risen Indeed!”

Our lives, this time, and all that is to come – they are all part of God’s ongoing story.

We will continue to gather in Jesus’ name, however we can, and we will take, bless, break, and share bread in this community and at home. We will look for the presence of the Risen Christ. And we will figure out

how to show our love for God and for our neighbor in all circumstances.

Because Hope is never gone. Hope is not quarantined or held at a distance. The Holy One is with us and with all of creation, weaving us together, and inviting us to open our eyes and recognize what abides.

And so, we pray, “Kindle our hearts, oh God, into a fierce, consuming fire!”

Amen.

<sup>1</sup> James Martin, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, p. 425.

<sup>2</sup> George Weigel, “The Easter Effect and How it Changed the World,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 30, 2018.



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