

“The Road to Now Here”

April 6, 2008

Easter 3, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

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Readings

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

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said 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?” (Luke 24:30–32)

Three travelers come to a place in the road where the third says that he has to go another way, on to his own home. But the other two are so rapt by what he’s been saying that they insist he not go on yet but have a meal with them, turn aside with them. Dusk is coming, and it will soon be too dark to travel safely. Apparently convinced, the third turns aside with them.

They arrive home and prepare dinner. And the conversation continues. The stranger asks them to tell him more about Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching, and they do. And he remarks and seems to marvel at the wisdom of the carpenter of Nazareth.

When finally the meal is served, the common bowl is placed at the center of their table, and the two ask the one if he wouldn’t mind saying the blessing over the food. The first takes the loaf and blesses it saying the Hebrew grace for bread, “*Baruch atto Adonai elohenu, melech ho’olom, ha-mo-tzee le-chem me’en ho-o-retz.*” He breaks the bread, then, and offers each a piece. They watch in awe as he sets the bread before them.

And the first of them, finding his voice, says, “Hey, wait a minute! I know you!”

And the second of them says, “Yeah, you’re — ”

And the third of them vanishes.

What a grand setup for the sermon I have for you, this morning. You may have thought that the road you were on was the road home, or even the road to nowhere. Turns out, it’s the road to now here.

Let me tell you what I mean.

Marcus Borg is an author whose work I truly respect. For those of you who are missing him preaching at the First United Methodist Church, this morning, don’t despair. I’m using an illustration of his as the primary illustration for this sermon!

I heard him speak at a clergy conference, a few years ago, and there he related a story that lends a lot to our understanding of what’s going on in the “Road to Emmaus” story we’ve heard this morning.

He and his wife were with a tour group going to see the places mentioned in the Bible, especially those significant to the New Testament — Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, the Jordan, Bethany, the Mount of Olives, the Holy Sepulcher. . . . When their guide, late one afternoon announced that they would be making a stop at Emmaus, the Borgs thought of this with excitement. On the evening of *this* day they would be stopping at the town where, on the evening of the day of Resurrection, two disciples of Jesus stopped to have dinner with a mysterious but well-informed traveller they had met on the road.

When the bus pulled into town, about six miles outside of Jerusalem, the sun was almost set. With excitement Marcus and his wife left the town square and approached the door of the church dedicated to the moment of recognition those disciples had. Some little boys were playing an eleventh-hour game of soccer before supper in the courtyard nearby.

The tourists tried the door, but the priests had already locked up. So, they walked around to observe the simple church and see if they might find any dedicatory plaques or other things to tell them more about the history of the building. As they passed the boys, one of them broke off and in broken English told them that the church was closed for the day. The Borgs said they

knew, and how disappointed they were that they couldn't get inside.

The boy told them not to worry, that if they wanted to see the Emmaus church, there was another town of Emmaus just up the road another 5 miles, and another church there, almost as nice as this one.

Marcus Borg says that that was rather confusing for the two of them, and that he had to admit to some disappointment, and expressed that disappointment to their tour guide on the busride back to Jerusalem. “Oh, yes,” said the guide, “there are five or six Emmauses nearby Jerusalem, all of them claiming to be the historic Emmaus. And who is going to tell these people that they are wrong when they truly believe that their town is the town where Jesus stopped? People will ask to go to Emmaus, and depending on when they ask, I take them to whichever one is closest.”

Adding to the confusion, I myself have read a number of different texts which try and locate just where Emmaus may have been, and I have always read that the fact is that none of the modern towns by that name can be dated back to the time of Christ.

Borg says that when the tour guide told him there were actually five or six Emmauses, he began to realize something significant about his wife's and his experience there at the one Emmaus. It is that believing can be a magnificent, unique opportunity for Christians because of *the way we believe*. For us, the depth of believing doesn't necessarily come from good Bible study or unquestioning obedience to God's will or the best practices of stewardship or even regular attendance in worship; it comes from our attention to our relationship with Christ.

Now, from a liberal theologian and for a people who think of themselves as liberal believers, maybe this comes as a bit of a shock. All that relationship talk that tends to take place tends to be among a certain (shall we say) more conservative crew than ourselves. We tend to talk about justice and action and maybe about prayer, but less so about relationship.

But the relationship really is the thing. However, because we are not entirely comfortable perhaps with the rather exuberant or (in the 18th Century they called it) enthusiastic ways of those who talk up right relationship, we probably need to go about our discussion and our practice somewhat differently. You will have found – those of you who attend here regularly – that my different way is to try to blend those more exuberant, enthusiastic understandings of relatedness with Jesus with the more sensory practices of the more so-called Catholic traditions (Roman, Anglican, Lutheran).

So, I did a footwashing demonstration with a few readers on Maundy Thursday; sprinkled the lot of you on Easter. Had it not snowed on Ash Wednesday, I would have smudged foreheads and the backs of hands with a blend of burnt Palm Sunday palms and olive oil (BTW, hang onto your Palm Sunday branches until next Fat Tuesday, when I'll burn them). I raise the elements during communion, not in order to mark the moment of transubstantiation but in order to take a moment to pause in elevation of the instant of our acknowledgment of Christ's offering for our sake.

Faith is not just in the head, not just in the heart. Christian faith is designed to be in the hands, in our noses, in our mouths, in our eyes, and, yes, as it is affirmed in the gospel reading for today: in our feet.

We are all of us on a journey, this story says, on a journey to (of all places) a table, where we will meet to know what we are speculating about and testing and imagining together along the way.

Such a time as that which happened on the road to Emmaus will arise for us – not just for Cleopas and (I presume) Mary – when we are engaged in discovering, uncovering, and recovering what all This means, this hope, this love, this faith. We will be in rich conversation about our experiences in light of the Bible – the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings – and our hearts will burn. And when we break bread, oh, when we break bread. . !

It is when Christ offers us the obvious, when Jesus is revealed among us, for

recognition's sake, that we know "that's the One," "Christ is here right now!"

This can be a whole new way of believing: sight, touch, smell, taste, feeling, our sensations informing us of our relationship with the One who unites us with God.

Remember what Dr. Borg learned on that tour bus with his wife, those years ago: Are you unsatisfied because the doors were closed to the church, here in Emmaus, this evening? Then, head a little farther down the road, there is another Emmaus, another opportunity to meet Jesus. But, in fact, you will have met him here too.

Because Emmaus is not bound to one location, nor one time. This is the road not to nowhere, but to now here. Emmaus is here in the heart. And everywhere we are meeting that mysterious stranger, our hearts burn as we talk about the book, our eyes are opened when we break the bread, and we meet the traveler again familiarly when we gather to share and gain experiences. . . in Jesus' name. Amen.