

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, April 6, 2008.

Easter is a season to celebrate and reflect upon the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, to wonder about the strange good news of Christ's victory over death. We need a whole season to ponder the news that Christ died and then rose again. We ponder not only that it happened but what it means for those who want to follow Christ. In today's lesson, some disciples have an encounter with the risen Christ. Afterwards they discover that their hearts have been set on fire. With burning hearts they see and believe. With burning hearts they go to share the good news.

When we meet the disciples of Jesus in this morning's Gospel lesson from Luke, their hearts are far from burning. We actually find two of them heading away from Jerusalem, two days after the crucifixion, even as they have received the news that their friends had found Jesus' tomb empty. Not only are they heading away from Jerusalem, they are heading away from their community. They are heading into isolation. While they are walking and talking, sorting through the details, Jesus himself comes near to them on the road. But their eyes are unable to recognize him. Their ears unable to distinguish Jesus' voice when he asks them "What are you talking about?" At Jesus' question, the disciples stop in their tracks. Their faces are sad. Their disappointment is evident. The disciple named Cleopas says "We had hoped that Jesus, a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people...we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel." "We had hoped," says Cleopas, and his hope apparently is now gone. Jesus responds not with a sympathetic ear but with a rebuke, "how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" Slow of heart. Cleopas and his companion are slow of heart. Distracted by disappointment...slow of heart. Burdened by unbelief...slow of heart. Hampered by hopelessness...slow of heart. They cannot believe that glory might actually follow suffering and death. They cannot believe that the empty tomb might be a good sign. They cannot believe, for they are going off by themselves, focused on what they had hoped would happen. Their hearts are slow, tangled in their own twisted ideas about how they thought the drama would unfold.

Cleopas and his companion have a slow heart condition. The same heart condition probably afflicted many of the other disciples as well. It continues to afflict disciples of Jesus. We disciples are still slow of heart. This kind of heart condition seems to be a part of the human condition. I do not know whether we are born with it or learn at an early age, but we have it. The cause of the condition is easy to diagnose but very difficult to treat. Slowness of heart is caused by an overabundance of old hope. How can you have an overabundance of hope? I said "old hope." The problem is too much old hope. Old hope is the hope that we hold on to even when life has changed. Old hope is the unmet expectations of a previous time. We hold on to these expectations because they are familiar to us, they make sense to us. We then try to project our old expectations onto a new situation, and this strategy usually leads to some disappointment. As Jesus said earlier, "You can't put new wine into old wineskins." It leads to a heavy and a slow heart, a heart that has a hard time believing in what God is doing now. "We had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel." says Cleopas. What he means is "we had a great concept of who the Messiah would be, and it did not turn out the way we thought it would." Cleopas' disappointment slows his heart and keeps him from believing that God is providing new hope. What old hope slows down our hearts? What clings to us and keeps us from believing,

keeps us from recognizing the resurrection before us? What keeps us from believing all that Moses and the prophets have declared: that God promises to be with us, that God is always doing a new thing, that in the midst of trouble and travail, we can find a sense of joy and peace. Our old hope might be something small, like the expectation that our day will unfold in a certain way. We wake up in the morning with the hope that our day will go according to plan. When something unexpected happens, we get thrown off completely, and we spend the rest of the day dealing with the disappointment which is based in our old hope for what the day would look like. Slow hearts. This same situation plays itself out in our daily lives, in our lives as whole. Some of us are still carrying around the disappointment from years ago, and it slows our hearts. We are slow of heart to believe that God has promised new life and a sense of peace, even in the midst of persistent trouble. We are slow of heart to believe that God's glory can emerge from suffering. The resurrection teaches us that God's glory appears in new and often strange ways. We are slow of heart: instead of giving ourselves over to new hope and resurrection, we are inhibited by our old and familiar ways of seeing. And like the disciples in today's story, when we feel slow of heart, we go off by ourselves, leaving our community behind.

Even though they are lost in their slow heartedness, Jesus finds them and touches their hearts. It is interesting that the risen Lord turns to the scriptures to explain himself. In order to help the disciples understand the new thing that God is doing, Jesus goes back to the old words of Moses and the prophets. Luke tells us that Jesus "interpreted the things about himself in all the scriptures." Later, after the disciples finally recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread, after Jesus then disappears, Cleopas and companion remark to each other, "were not our hearts burning while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Their hearts were burning as Jesus interpreted the scriptures. Something about the way Jesus spoke the old words set their hearts on fire. What slowed down their hearts was the old hope, not the old words upon which that hope was founded. What slowed down their hearts was their own misinterpretation of scripture, not the scripture itself. And so Jesus turns their slow hearts into burning hearts with the heat of holy writ. The risen Christ resurrects a new hope, and a new life promised by the ancient and eternal word of God. That new hope sends the disciples rushing back to rejoin their community and to share the good news.

Jesus sets their hearts on fire. The cure for a slow heart is a holy fire. We are not condemned to slowness of heart, because Christ can set our hearts ablaze. Many of us have learned along the way that a fire requires three things: fuel, heat, and air. The fuel of a burning heart is old hope. What burns is our old ways of seeing, our limited concepts of what should have or could have been. If we want our hearts to burn, we have to examine ourselves, rake out the old hope, and then offer it to God like a bundle of dry sticks. The heat of a burning heart comes from the heat of God's word, the heat of the prophets, the heat of scripture. If we want our hearts to burn, we have to rub them up against the Word of God. That rubbing happens as we gather for Bible study, as we read the written word. We all need to be involved in some kind of Bible study for this reason. It also happens as we encounter the living Word of God in each other. The heat happens as we hear God speaking through our neighbors, through persons who seem strange to us, just as the risen Christ seemed a stranger to the disciples on the road. The heat does not happen in isolation but as we rub up against each other and the words of scripture in community. And then there's the third element of the burning heart: the air, the breath, the Holy Spirit of God that mixes with fuel and heat and catalyzes into flame. We cannot catch our own hearts on fire. We need God's breath blowing on us and around us. A burning heart is old hope reworked by the heat of God's ancient word and blown into new flame by the Holy Spirit. This cure for our slow heartedness is likely to be uncomfortable. We do not call it "heart burn" because it feels good. Only this kind of heart burn does not come from eating too much greasy food. This kind of heart burn comes from

eating with Christ. This kind of heart burning comes from breaking bread with a risen savior who opens the Word of God in such a way that our old hope goes up in smoke and our hearts are made light.

As we continue to reflect on the strange good news of the resurrection, we ask God for burning hearts. We ask Christ to open the scriptures to us as he opened Moses and the prophets to his disciples on the road to Emmaus. We ask Jesus Christ who sets our hearts on fire and to set us free. We need hearts free from old hope so that we are free to embrace what God wants for us now. We need burning hearts so that we are free to love, free to believe, and free to hope in new ways. We need burning hearts so that we might not retreat into isolation but reach out and explore the good news together. I say “explore” because we are still understanding what this strange good news is about. I say “explore” because Easter is a journey not a destination. God, set our hearts on fire so that we might have some light on the path. Set our hearts on fire so that we might rejoin our brothers and sisters and set the world on fire with your truth, your justice, and your love.