

Christ Comes to Us

I want to begin today by sharing a controversial statement that I read this past week. Here it is: “the unwillingness of those who have heard to share good news with those who haven’t heard is the worst form of privileged smugness. Those who haven’t heard the truth about God deserve to be told.” I’ll repeat that: “the unwillingness of those who have heard to share good news with those who haven’t heard is the worst form of privileged smugness. Those who haven’t heard the truth about God deserve to be told.”

It’s a statement about evangelism, of course, about our willingness or unwillingness to share the Good News. And it says that our unwillingness to evangelize is actually a form of arrogance, of using our privilege to withhold something valuable from others. I don’t know about you, but I think that’s a controversial thing to say in our church.

We tend to define ourselves in distinction to evangelical churches or evangelical Christians. For us, evangelism is almost a bad word; it’s certainly a word with negative connotations, a word with a lot of baggage.

For us, our unwillingness to evangelize seems like a good thing. Far from being a sign of our arrogance or smugness, we see it as a reflection of our modesty, our reluctance to force our faith on others. This statement suggests otherwise, that our reticence is a problem. How can that be? That’s what I want to explore with you today, by looking at our Gospel story—a story of a remarkable experience that leads sharing the good news.

Our Gospel story for today is one of the most powerful and compelling stories in all of Scripture. It’s certainly one of the most memorable. Two disciples making their way, in a spirit of great sadness, away from Jerusalem and toward the town of Emmaus. They are joined by the risen Jesus, only they don’t recognize him; perhaps in their grief their gaze is so firmly fixed on the ground that they don’t even look up to meet the stranger’s eyes.

They walk and talk together, the stranger gently inviting them to open their hearts. In return, the stranger opens the Scriptures to them, leading them to see what they had not noticed to that point. Something is stirred in them, because as they draw near to their destination and he appears to be

traveling on, they implore him to stay with them.

And then at table the stranger “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them...” (and our minds fill in the words of the Communion liturgy: ‘Take, eat: this is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’)

In that moment their eyes are opened, their blindness lifts, and they see that the crucified and resurrected Jesus is with them. Then, just as suddenly, Jesus vanishes from their sight. He’s made his point, and now he can go on. In response to what they have seen and heard, the two disciples get up and rush back to Jerusalem to share the good news.

They have experienced something so remarkable, so incredible, that they just can’t keep it to themselves.

Now, maybe if we had been there, if we had had that experience at the table, with the breaking of the bread—that revelation of Jesus’ real presence—maybe then we would also be enthusiastic evangelists. But here we are, two thousand years after the fact: how can we possibly approach the experience that those two disciples had?

But see, that’s actually precisely the point of a story like this: it’s to say that if it could happen to them, it could happen to us. God has raised Jesus from the dead, so Jesus can show up to two

disciples walking the road to Emmaus; and just as assuredly the risen Jesus can show up in our lives.

The fact that the risen Jesus shows up and returns to his disciples—the very people who had abandoned him, and denied him, and disappointed him in the end—the fact that Jesus returns to them, and tries again to teach them, and accompany them: this is meant to show us how much God loves us, and how determined God is to love us. Not only did God send the Son Jesus to us to teach us and to save us; but even after we crucified Jesus, he comes back again to be with us.

This story gives us confidence that there is nothing we have done, and nothing in our faith lives, no matter how checkered our relationship with God has been; there is nothing that would get in the way of Jesus coming to us, showing up in our lives.

Well there is one thing perhaps that might get in the way, and that is our unwillingness to believe. If we are determined to believe that this is just a story of something that happened a long time ago, and that Jesus is—and can only be—a figure of the past: well sure, that’s going to get in the way of the risen Jesus showing up in our lives.

Last week Heather Burton spoke about doubt and belief and certainty, and cautioned us about the ways that certainty can close us off, and unnecessarily narrow our horizons, and diminish us. It seems to me that sometimes we get near to a certainty

that the resurrection *didn't* happen in the way that Scripture describes, that Jesus wasn't really raised from the dead, and then of course we cut ourselves off from experiencing what the first disciples experienced.

If Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, then how could we ever hope to experience the life-altering, world-shattering good news that they couldn't keep to themselves?

Which takes us back to that question of evangelism. If we haven't experienced the risen Christ then we really haven't got good news to share, have we? I mean, if what we have is the story of a great man who lived a long time ago and did many good things, well that's something. But I don't believe it's enough. If that's the story, then we can point to others and we sometimes do: great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. Great people, all of them; and yes they do serve as sources of inspiration for us.

But this is not the Church's story. Maybe part of our problem with evangelism is that we've gotten out of touch with our story.

The Church's story is that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus into the world to save us, to save the world. Jesus went to the borders, the margins, the low places: the places of neglect, and poverty, and suffering; like a light in the darkness.

Jesus went to those whom the world didn't love, those who were mistreated, and discarded, due to the hardness of our hearts, our self-interest, the limits of our compassion. Jesus went to all those places as an ambassador and an embodiment of God's love.

This was as radical and dangerous a move then as it would be today. It upset the order of a world in which the wealthy and powerful and strong called the shots. And so Jesus was put to death by the powerful, in order to silence him, and in order to brutally crush the hopes of anyone who had come to believe that God was not blind or deaf to their plight.

For three days, it looked like their plan worked. For those who remained there was nothing but tears, and unspeakable grief. Silence. But then on Easter morning, the stone was rolled away, the tomb was opened wide, because God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus, the one who had gone to the low places; Jesus, the friend of the poor, the light in the darkness, the enemy of oppressors; this Jesus God raised from death.

The Church's story is that God's resurrection of Jesus is the greatest thing that has happened in the history of the world. It is the definitive sign of who God loves, and how God loves, and of the power of God's love. God's resurrection of Jesus is the definitive sign that the old certainties—inequality, injustice, suffering, and death—that these no longer have the

last word. Because Christ is risen, risen indeed.

Now that's a great story! That's a story that we can't keep to ourselves. In this story, Jesus is not a figure of the past. In this story, the time and distance between us and the story of the Emmaus road collapses, because Christ is risen, as available to us as to he was to them.

If we could get to that place as a church, as a gathering of disciples, imagine what a difference it would make. If every time we gathered in this sanctuary we knew, with some level of confidence if not certainty, that the risen Christ was really present, not just as an idea or source of inspiration, but *really* present like on the Emmaus road. If at every meeting we set a place for Christ at the table, and expected him to show up.

If in our pastoral care visits, and our outreach meals, we didn't just set out to imitate Jesus, but actually to meet him. If in everything we did in our lives, we did it in the confidence that God really did raise Jesus from the dead, and we allowed the truth of that good news to shape all our decisions, all our commitments, all our priorities. Now that, that would be something to share! That would be news we couldn't keep to ourselves.

Now, some of you are already there. Some of you I know have a strong, active, personal relationship with Jesus. And those of you who do can't help but share it. Some of us, me

included, have a ways to go on this. And keep in mind, I'm not talking about certainty here, but about a level of confidence in the story, a trust that enables us to live as if this story is true, truer than all the other stories we've been told.

In the season of Easter, God invites us to grow in trust, to grow in our confidence in this story. I want to close by praying a blessing over you. This is a prayer by Chuck Wilhelm, an invocation, an invitation to the risen Christ.

I pray that Christ may come to you early in the morning, as he came to Mary that morning in the garden. And I pray that you find Christ in the night when you need him as Nicodemus did. May Christ come to you while you are a child, for when disciples tried to stop them, Jesus insisted that the children come to him.

I pray that Christ may come to you when you are old, as he came to old Simeon's arms and made him cry, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation."

And may Christ come to you in your grief as he did for Mary and Martha when they lost their brother. May Christ come to you in joy as he did to the wedding in Cana. And may Christ visit you when you are sick, as he did for the daughter of Jairus, and for so many who could not walk or stand straight, or see, or hear till he came.

May Christ come to you in glory upon your dying day as he did to the thief hanging beside him that Good Friday.

And though you seldom come to him, and though you often “make your bed in hell,” as I do, may you find Christ descending there, where the apostles in their creed agreed he went—so you would know there is no place he would not come for you.

Amen.

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