First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

April 23, 2023

An Idle Tale?

Luke 24:13-35

**13**Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles[a] from Jerusalem, **14**and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. **15**While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, **16**but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. **17**And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad.[b] **18**Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” **19**He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, **20**and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. **21**But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. **22**Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, **23**and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. **24**Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.” **25**Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! **26**Was it not necessary that the Messiah[e] should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” **27**Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.**28**As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. **29**But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So, he went in to stay with them. **30**When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. **31**Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. **32**They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us[f] while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” **33**That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. **34**They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” **35**Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

When I was growing up, we only had one car which my dad needed for work and, as a result, the four of us kids walked everywhere we went. We didn’t think anything of walking 2 or 3 miles one way just to get to the mall and because I’ve always been freakishly tall, with very long legs, I walked *fast!* I mean fast, as in people had to almost run to keep up with me. To this day, when I’m walking with someone else, I have to consciously slow down and take smaller steps, in order not to outpace my companion. Yeah, I know, you all are probably thinking, tall person problems, boo hoo pastor!

In Jesus’ day, of course, walking was a primary means of getting from point A to point B, and that’s just what Cleopas and his unnamed companion are doing. Walking the 7 miles home from Jerusalem after a terrifying and exhausting week.

The narrative of the walk to Emmaus is a continuation of Luke’s version of the resurrection, as found in the first 12 verses of Luke 24. And, as I was preparing this sermon, I realized that as many times as I’ve preached about Luke’s take on this most important event, I’ve been overlooking something. What’s missing in today’s passage is an important part of the story, and if we go back a bit, we might be able to understand why Cleopas and his companion are such an important part of Luke’s narrative.

In Luke’s telling of the resurrection story, when the women run back to proclaim the resurrection to the eleven, and all the rest, verse 11 tells us that …*these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them*. It’s highly probable that Cleopas and his friend were counted among all the rest, and that they shared the disbelief of the others. And it’s that lack of faith which I believe Luke is addressing in today’s reading.

What we know, here, is that our travelers were followers of Jesus, they believed that he was a great prophet, and they have been shocked and saddened by the rollercoaster of events they’ve just witnessed. Like so many others, they had hoped that Jesus was the one who would save them from the Roman occupation and, like so many others, their faith in the whole Jesus thing was badly shaken.

When Jesus appears to Cleopas and his friend, he asks them what they’re talking about. Cleopas responds, basically asking this stranger how can it be that he’s be the only who doesn’t know what happened? Jesus’ response of “what things,” must have seem impossibly naive, but Cleopas goes on and gives a brief synopsis of what had occurred.

I’ve always been a bit taken aback at Jesus’ response to Cleopas’ version of events, because it seems harsh. Verse 25 tells us that, *“Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!”* Whoops! Looks like Cleopas has stepped in it a bit.

Jesus then walks these two boneheads through everything that has been written and prophesied about the coming of the Messiah, going all the way back to Moses. After all of that, these guys *still* didn’t recognize who was waking with them. And they wouldn’t until later that evening, when their eyes were opened as Jesus broke bread and gave it to them.

What starts out as an idle tale for Cleopas and his companion; a story that is just too far-fetched to be believed, becomes a story of full on belief, when their eyes are finally opened and they see Jesus for who he truly is. I wonder, could the Emmaus story be a pretty accurate description for many of our own faith journeys?

Having been raised in a highly religious environment, faith was something I took for granted. We were observant Mormons, we went to church every Sunday, we had Family Home Evening, we were taught to pay tithing, we prayed over every meal. Basically, we practiced the faith our parents taught us without thinking too much about it. It just was what it was. It wasn’t until much later, after some traumatic events, that I came to realize my faith life had been on autopilot. Yeah, I said I believed, but looking back, it’s obvious now that my faith was a mile wide and an inch deep. It wasn’t until I was given the opportunity to see faith, and Jesus, in a different context that my eyes were truly opened.

For those of us who have struggled with faith, the Emmaus journey isn’t easy. Moving from faith being just an idle tale to seeing Jesus for who he truly is, can be a difficult needle to thread.

So, let me ask you this: Where are you on the road to Emmaus? How do you experience faith, perhaps differently from the way you’ve been taught, and how can your eyes be opened anew to who Jesus truly is?

For some, experiencing faith in a different context is the realization that caring for all of God’s creation is vital. For others, seeing Jesus for who he truly is, comes from experiencing and participating in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. For others still, moving from faith being just an idle tale, involves working for the inclusion of all God’s children in the life and ministry of the church.

But, there’s a catch: In order for our faith to become more than a mile wide and an inch deep, there are a few things we have to do. First, we need to be open to the possibility that we’ve just been coasting. Do we truly pray for forgiveness when we pray the Prayer of Confession each week, for example? Or is it just words on a page.

Second, I believe we have to take concrete steps to put our faith into action. If caring for God’s creation is important to you, as it should be to all of us, then become willing to advocate for change in behaviors that can cause harm to the planet. If seeing Jesus for who he truly is, happens for you during communion, then be willing to come to the table with an open heart and mind and be ready to allow the experience to change you. If moving your faith from the status of just an idle tale involves working for full inclusion of all of God’s children, don’t just sit back bemoaning the treatment of marginalized people, get out and do the work.

Here’s the thing; We’ve all had our Emmaus Road moments, where our faith has been shaken. We’ve also had those moments where our eyes are opened and we see the resurrected Christ anew. The examples I’ve listed are just a few of the ways our eyes can be opened to who Jesus really is, and there are many other ways for our eyes to be opened to the reality of the Easter message.

Remember that Luke’s description of the events that happened on the road to Emmaus didn’t just end with our friend’s eyes being opened and Jesus simply vanishing. Cleopas and his companion go all the way back to Jerusalem that very night, to share what they’ve seen. They took action on their newly energized faith, and that’s the key, because faith without action isn’t worth much. Finding ways to experience our resurrected Savior in unexpected and new ways is exciting and life affirming. It should encourage us; embolden us even, to live into that rejuvenated faith by taking action, to do the work to change our communities, our churches and yes, even the world in order to bring about God’s Kingdom here on earth. AMEN