

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina, Easter 3 (10 April 2005):
Acts 2:14a, 36-47; 1 Peter 1L17-23; Luke 24:13-35

Life Through the Brokenness

“Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.”

Taken from the biblical experience of Jesus as God's Lamb, an image derived from John's gospel (1:19), this statement marks the dramatic action within the church's historic Eucharistic worship, known as the “Fraction.” The priest takes the consecrated and symbolic bread and breaks it in full view of the congregation, often with audible results. Silence follows, as if to dare us to consider what has happened, until words punctuate the action: “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.”

If I could convey one thing to you about the authenticity of Christian worship, it would be this: Liturgy is scripture and tradition in action. If you ever wonder, as I do, why we bother to do this, the answer is clear and sure: Liturgy (our worship) is scripture and tradition in action. First and foremost, this is life as God sees it.

Specifically, in the celebration of Holy Communion we are reconstituted as Christ's Body, reminded in profound terms of Whose we are and (therefore) who and what and why we are. Such faithful worship is the fundamental reality test for all people. Indeed, we quite literally “do this” so that we can remember (that is, be conscious of) what is really real.

So, it was that two men were walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus.^[1] Along with many other followers, they had originally come to Jerusalem to share the Passover with Jesus, their rabbi, their leader, their master, their hope. Word had urgently spread throughout the disciples' fledgling community that this particular Passover would be, to use a favorite term of the Master, himself, the time when his “hour” would come. Palpably, a heightened expectation surged throughout Jesus' embryonic movement. Finally, they could dare to confess their deepest hopes: that the Messiah would now emerge for all to see and free Israel from all her enemies. Finally, redemption would come, and all those who had kept Israel down would be paid back. Finally, fortunes would be reversed, and this rag-tag band of disciples would be the vanguard of the great awakening. Finally, Jesus would play all his cards, and the game would be victoriously over.

Yet, instead of celebrating victory, the events of the previous three days contained only sheer agony and dreadful woe. Jesus, rather than being gloriously enthroned, was ignominiously hung on a cross. Instead of ushering in a new order, the followers of Jesus were being scattered like chaff before a driving wind. And in particular, these two men from Emmaus, rather than seeing the marvel of the Romans being thrown out, the Temple being purified, and God's kingdom on earth being ushered in – these two men now returned home with their tails between their legs. Their leader had been humiliated, tortured, and summarily executed; and with this horrid turn of events, the dreams and hopes of those who had followed Jesus' along the Way were thrown into utter darkness and despair.

It was a long, long walk home. Never had those seven miles been so excruciatingly difficult. The two couldn't understand what had gone wrong. Jesus was no fraud. They had seen him do marvelous things, even raise Lazarus from the dead. Why it was not that long ago that even one of the Jewish leaders confronted Jesus to say that no one could do such things unless he were from God. Sure, talk about the coming Messiah was as plentiful as the dust on the road, but Jesus' talk was accompanied by signs – signs of the truth of his vision, his power, and his words.

It was not something one could readily understand, but the impact of his vision of life with God touched the human heart in such a way that hope uncontrollably erupted from within to celebrate redemption. This was no ordinary man. This was no ordinary leader. This was no ordinary vision. This was no ordinary experience. But instead of realized expectations, the two men walked the unbearable seven miles back home, wondering how it was that they had gotten it so wrong. Jesus was dead. He never raised a finger in protest, not one word of defiance.

They had spent Thursday night in Bethany, at the safe house, and entered the outskirts of Jerusalem on Friday to find a frenzied scene of people gathered in sight of three crosses. Disbelieving their own eyes, they gazed upon the figure on the central cross and recognized their heroic leader. Stupefied, they found some other followers and pieced together the story. Confused, bewildered, they waited to see what would happen. Surely, surely this would be the time when another miraculous sign would transform this brutality and barrenness; but no: there was no sign, no miracle – just a death, as ordinary and heartbreaking as any other death.

Things did not get simpler. Before they left the city to return to Emmaus, the two men made contact with the remaining disciples and caught word that the women had some news about Jesus, that he was not dead! "Women!!!" they thought. "Get a grip; deal with reality. This is no time for hysteria." They had all been taken for fools! Jesus was dead. It was all over; nice try. All that was left was to save what remained of their former lives, stay low, and try to get by.

So, they walked side-by-side, rehearsing before one another all that they had heard and seen and thought and felt. On occasion, their deep grief erupted in bitter outbursts, only to return to tearful disappointment and heartache. Then, they realized that they were not alone. Someone – a stranger --had sidled up to them along the roadway. How long had he been there, going stride for stride with them in utter silence? What kind of voyeur was this to eavesdrop on such an intensely personal matter? But before they could express their irritation at his unwanted presence, the stranger spoke. "What on earth have you two been talking about with so much intensity?"

Choice words immediately came to mind in reply, but discretion overrode the two men's reactive passion. With a passable modicum of civility, Cleopas managed to spit out something on the order of "where have you been all weekend?" Overlooking the sprayed spittle that punctuated the disciple's veiled rage, the stranger simply asked: "Tell me; what's been going on?"

And thus began another intense, cathartic rehearsal of the past three days' events. Like victims of a tragedy finally having their day in court, the two men from Emmaus rattled through the recent trials, proffering their opinions and testing their analysis. The stranger remained impassively silent, listening intently, respectfully,

almost with compassion. Then, without a hint of warning, the stranger broke in with what could have been taken as rudeness. “How stupid can you be? How slow to catch on to the true meaning of what has happened!” And without so much as a pregnant pause, the stranger lit into a review of all that the biblical witness conveyed about the Messiah and the in-breaking of God's kingdom. With special emphasis, he reminded them how the prophets warned that God's own harbinger would suffer rejection before victory's triumph. And as he went on with his explanation, something inside the two Emmaus men reignited and grew in warmth and illumination.

They could scarcely believe their ears, how far they had strayed from the prophetic witness, how distracted and limited they had become through their own expectations. Yet, in spite of how much sense the stranger was making, they still could not make the connection concerning what he said and who he was.

Walking steadily as they talked, the threesome came to a fork in the road. Emmaus was to the left, just over the small hill. As the two men began to take that road, they noticed the stranger going onto the other. Recognizing that the day was spent and that it would soon be dark, embarrassment suddenly flushed their faces, as they realized that they had been talking about matters of the heart and soul with a purifying intensity. Yet, they did not know this stranger's name.

They overcame that social awkwardness and invited him to lodge with them for the night. Graciously and gratefully, the stranger accepted their offer.

The men settled in from their three-hour walk. They lit a fire, located some bread, and pour three cups of wine in preparation for the evening meal. After washing the road's grime from their hands and faces and feet, they sat down at the table. With the same kind of naturalness with which the stranger entered the conversation along the road, he began to offer the table blessing. Even though he was not the host but a guest in the house – and a stranger, at that – this role reversal somehow seemed appropriate. Then, unpretentiously, the stranger continued and took the round loaf of bread in his hands. Lifting it slowly from the plate, he broke it in two.

At the very moment that their ears heard the crackling sound of the bread's crust, which broke like the sound of bones in a body, for the first time their eyes also noticed the marks on his hands. And simultaneously a shuddered from deep within these two men was released, as if their souls had just gasped their last breaths and unexpectedly found joy. Instinctively, they both reached across the table toward the risen Christ to embrace him, but as they reached out, mysteriously Jesus was gone. Tellingly, however, Jesus' departure from them was not disturbing or hurtful. Rather, without a single word between them, they simply rose from the table and race back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. And what they would tell that group was that the Christ is risen, indeed. And nothing would ever be the same again.

“Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.”

Throughout this season of Easter, I wish to keep asking the same series of questions: What is the resurrection? What does it mean for us? How can we live its truth? Moreover, as important as the answers to these questions are (and I am committed to being clear as possible about them), the answers remain invisible to most of us (as they were initially for the original followers of Jesus) when we fail to remember the

overall story of God's promises, when we fail to remember what those stories mean, and – most tellingly – when we fail to be held accountable for living what we have remembered.

So, if you find yourself in the predicament of the two men from Emmaus, having lost everything you had hoped for, believed in, worked toward – if your marriage is sour, your job a treadmill, your stomach an acid-filled pit, then, like the men from Emmaus who also desperately wanted answers to their questions, it may be more beneficial to turn instead to the questions and ask: Who will remind me of God's story? Who will remind me of its meaning? Who will remind me to live what I have remembered?

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast.”

At the core of resurrection's meaning lies the proclamation that death has been returned to its proper place, not as a defining end but as a break-in point to God's eternity. Resurrection assures us that there is more to life than what we make of it. Resurrection reveals life on God's terms, and resurrection takes what we know – even what we frightfully and fiercely hold onto – to be broken open in order for fear to be scattered and joyful abundance to emerge.

Crack. Snap. The bread is broken. Christ's body is broken. Our lives are broken. Otherwise, how would anyone ever know that inside an acorn a great oak awaits to emerge?

Who will remind me of God's story? Who will remind me of its meaning? Who will remind me to live what I have remembered?

“Alleluia! Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast. Alleluia!” Amen.

^[1] I owe the kernel of what follows to Morton Kelsey's reflection on the Emmaus story, found in his book: [The Drama of Resurrection](#), page 45ff.