

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Third Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2020

(Luke 24:13-35)

One day last November, my family and I visited the Museum of the Shenandoah in Winchester to take in a wonderful exhibition of etchings by Rembrandt and several of his contemporaries. Those of you who were at one of our Christmas Eve services in Millwood may remember my having talked about the deep personal impact made by one of those etchings, a depiction of the angels' visitation to the shepherds.

There was however another piece that struck me with equal force, a depiction of today's reading from Luke. Entitled "Christ and His Disciples in Emmaus," it is a simple yet incredibly powerful scene. For me, the *simplicity* is in the *setting*: a dim room illuminated by a single candle; a low table covered by a plain white cloth; three mismatched chairs that have been pulled up to the table; windows over which the shutters have been pulled closed and bolted shut; an empty niche on the wall where perhaps the candle was sitting before being lit for dinner.

Then again, for me the *power* is found in the *people* in that room and their actions in the moment. In one chair, a person is seated in the shadows with their hands raised to their face in shock. A second person has seemingly risen from their seat and is recoiling into the darkness of a corner, stunned by what they have just witnessed ... the amazement on their face fully illuminated. And the third chair? The third chair is empty except for what appears to be a robe or a cloak. On the table in front of that chair is a plate, lit by the glow of the candle.

And on the plate, two pieces of bread.

Jesus is no longer physically in the room, but he is very much present in the bread he had just moments before blessed and broken. On the surface, Jesus' physical absence might lead some to think that "Jesus and His Disciples at Emmaus" is a poor choice for a title; after all, in this scene he's *not* there. Or is he? When considering the deeper significance of the broken bread and remembering his words from two chapters earlier – "*This is my body, which is given for you*"<sup>1</sup> – we find it a very appropriate title indeed.

This morning, some may feel like the disciples in that room. Emotionally it may seem as if things are dimly lit, as if there's only a single candle in front of us. Being indoors so much and for so long may give the psychological impression that the shutters in our lives have been pulled closed and bolted tight. The sudden loss of control over things ... having to piece together a new way of life during this time ... may feel as if mismatched chairs have been dragged up to encircle the table of our existence.

In the midst of our anxiety, disappointment and grief over the way things have changed so dramatically, however, there's one other important part of this scene on which we should focus. Like the bread shared at that dinner, *we* have been blessed and broken open by

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 22:19 (NRSV).

Jesus, who is still very much with us. I don't doubt that it may be hard to see that; the certainty of that statement may be blocked out by the uncertainty of this moment. It certainly was something experienced by those two disciples. Think back to the beginning of this passage: Jesus joined these two as they were walking on the road, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him."<sup>2</sup> A translation of the original Greek adds even a bit more power: "... but the eyes of them were held not to know him."<sup>3</sup> Keeping someone from doing something could be as simple as standing in their way or distracting them, but in the Greek their eyes were **held**. It wasn't just that they didn't see; they **couldn't** see.

Yet in the simple act of blessing and breaking, their eyes were loosed and they saw Jesus – not just with their **eyes**, but with their **hearts** ... and **minds** ... and **souls**. In that instant, Jesus didn't simply become **known** to them; he became **truly present**.

A wonderful thing about this story is that it isn't one just to **watch**, but to **live** and **experience** for ourselves. As you read and heard this, did you notice that only one disciple is named, Cleopas? The other isn't identified; in fact, despite what we see in artistic portrayals like the one I described earlier, we don't even know if that second disciple is a man or woman. It's likely no accident, as the commentator Mark Douglas has pointed out: "Perhaps leaving a disciple unnamed is Luke's subtle rhetorical way of inviting us into the plot... Had both disciples been named, we readers would be observers more than potential participants in the story... An unnamed disciple provides an '[insert your name here]' moment for the reader."<sup>4</sup>

Where are the places we see in the world where a blank space has been left for us to fill in our names? This isn't a question about offering up someone else; this is a question about offering up **ourselves**. There are likely many, many times when we think someone else should write their name in that blank space, either because it's easier for us to do that or perhaps because we think they will accomplish whatever it is far better than we ever could. But when we write someone else's name on the line, I think we accomplish two things: first, we shift responsibility away from us and onto another; and second, perhaps most importantly, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to give and receive powerful gifts.

In this story from Luke, there's a blank line offered. Even in this time of physical distancing, there are blank lines offered. We can offer our names to pick up the phone to call and check on someone. We can take out a piece of stationary to send a note, or sit at the computer to type an email. We can run an errand for someone who may need an extra hand. Sometimes it could be as simple as smiling and waving from our front porches.

When we encounter a blank space, whose name will we write in? Whose name will **you** write in? In Eucharistic Prayer C in The Book of Common Prayer, there is a section where the celebrant says, "Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us," and the congregation replies, "Risen Lord, be known to us in the breaking of the Bread."<sup>5</sup> If we sign our names on that line – if we *insert our name here*, in the words of Douglas – we will put ourselves in the story.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:16 (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> Interlinear Bible translation of the original Greek version of Luke 24:16. <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/luke/24.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Mark Douglas, "Luke 24:13-49 – Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 2*.

<sup>5</sup> From "Eucharistic Prayer C." *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 372.

We will put ourselves at the center.

We will give ourselves an opportunity once again to *see Christ* and *know Christ* in the breaking of the bread and the breaking open of our hearts.

Amen.