***“Burning within Us”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, April 26, 2020

**Luke 24:13–27, 30–32**

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. 18Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days? . . . The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned . . . 21 We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. . . 22Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23and 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. 24Some 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.” 25Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” . . . 27Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures...

30He took bread, blessed and broke it. 31Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 32They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

These two people on the road are disciples who, like many others, had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel (24:21). This is a nationalistic hope, which puts them in the same camp as Peter and John and some of the other apostles. But they are sincere, and their hearts are heavy from having seen the violent activities of the last week. Further, they are a bit confused. They have heard a report of the Resurrection, but they don’t yet believe it.

They seem to be unaware of Jesus’ own repeated foretelling that he would be condemned by the chief priests, put to death, but that he would rise from the dead. Further, these two disciples, like the male apostles, don’t seem to accept the women’s resurrection testimony, which they have heard only in reduced form regarding angels saying that Jesus was alive. They put more stock in the apostles who went to the tomb and experienced nothing, than in the women who went and heard from angels, and more than angels, really. They haven’t accepted this report.

When Jesus takes the familiar action of blessing and breaking the bread, they finally recognize him, and then he disappears from their presence. Only then, with this first-hand experience of Jesus, do these two come to believe that he has risen from the dead. They are not very different, then, from the apostles, who also don’t believe until they have had a first-hand experience of the risen Jesus. But I don’t think it was the miraculous part—the sudden disappearance of Jesus—that affirmed their belief. It was their heart-warming reflection on Jesus’ words. It was an inward experience, and that is what they talk about to each other at the end.

How about us? Our belief in the Resurrection draws upon the long Christian tradition behind us, including the Bible itself. But there is more than that. There is our individual faith experience. The Bible stories ring true for us mainly because they resonate, they speak to our hearts. That’s the first-hand experience that *we* have had. Even if we say our belief is shaped by the Bible, there is still some inward and personal experience that underlies our willingness to *accept* that testimony. In the end, personal intuition and values are what nourish and shape our faith. Our spiritual responses are formed by our *inward* experience, not primarily mental, but having to do with values that are *felt* or even *intuited*. Our faith is always based on some first-hand experience with the truth or the love of God. Each of us has a unique and valid experience.

Where do we see this happening in today’s Scripture? I see it in what the two disciples say to each other: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was . . . opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). They are receptive to what Jesus tells them, and their hearts are *burning*, even though they still do not recognize Jesus. But they *will*. They are on their *way* to believing in the Resurrection, because their hearts are responding to truth. They are having that inner experience that I mentioned.

What are the truths that Jesus taught? On this occasion, he was opening up the Old Testament prophecies to them. Let’s return to when Jesus announced the beginning of his ministry, at the synagogue in Nazareth, when he read from Isaiah 61, and said “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). He says that he is the one anointed by “the Spirit . . . to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18; Isa 61:2; 35:5).

Well, who is more blind than the one who is *spiritually* blind? Who is more oppressed than the one who is mentally stuck? Who is more thoroughly a captive than he who is captive to obsolete thinking? Jesus’ own apostles are the first ones that he freed from captivity. Most of them were stuck in a nationalistic religious hope, one that envisioned the Messiah crushing the Gentiles and leading a Jewish army into conquest. Jesus pried all but one of his apostles loose from that belief. He won them over by truth and love, by his sensitivity and love toward each one of them *personally*. Their personal experience with Jesus, plus their later reception of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, empowered them to believe and to act with energetic faith.

Now, the two disciples on the road are also having a personal experience with Jesus, when their hearts burn within as he unfolds the Old Testament to them (Luke 24:32). I suspect these were passages of hope, like his inaugural prophecy about releasing the captives, or like some others from Isaiah, such as “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (40:11). Or “on that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him” (Isa 11:10).

Aren’t these the hopes that *we* see Jesus fulfilling? Don’t we see him as the teacher who loved his students, who opened up the way for Gentiles to be saved, and for women and children to be respected equally with men? The Word is for all people. In the kingdom of God there is no hierarchy between rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile. All who *will*, may come.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the most spiritual of the Old Testament prophets’ hopes. He never identified with the violent prophecies such as breaking “the nations . . . with a rod of iron” (Ps 2:9). We have to read the Old Testament in light of the greater knowledge of God’s truth and love that we now have. The light of truth has taken us further. We learn to recognize the spiritual burning within us, and we trust that. “The Spirit of truth,” Jesus said, “abides with you” (John 14:17), and “The Spirit of truth . . . will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). Here is the inward basis of our faith.

It certainly empowered the apostles in their preaching and ministry, and it was their love, not just their preaching, that gained converts. When people *experience* the truth that is being proclaimed, they are ready to accept it. And the apostles had their own experiences to sustain them when they were persecuted.

We, too, are sustained by our inward experience of the Spirit, and our memories of key moments in our faith walk. Jesus said “the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt 13:52). Bring out your own treasured memories, recent or old. I remember when I graduated with an M.A. in New Testament. My father and brother were present; everybody was rooting for me. My wife recalls going fishing with her dad, just the two of them: an intimate memory. She also remembers whenever her family moved and she was thrown into a new community of students, there would always be one who would step up and make friends with her. It was an unforced act of kindness, and it felt like a blessing.

You have treasures, new and old, and you can use them. Cherish your memories of love and truth. God values *your* experience. Jesus spent time with people. He would spend time with you now.