

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

April 26, 2008, 3rd Sunday in Lent

Psalm 116: 1-4, 12-14, 17-19, Luke 24:13-35

ALONG THE ROAD

There is has been much debate among Bible scholars through the years about who it was that walked along the road to Emmaus that day with Cleopas. There are some who believe that it might have been Cleopas's wife. Let us listen to what she might have said that day, as they walked with the stranger who seemed to be the only one who didn't know what had happened in Jerusalem during the Passover:

I come to you this morning with a story to tell. It might surprise you that a woman of Emmaus tells this story, but it is my story as much as any of the men who followed Jesus.

If you try to read about me today all you'll find is the name of my husband, Cleopas.

But I was there too.

I too followed Jesus of Nazareth.

I too was part of that crowd of believers, who followed him from town to town.

Walking with the twelve he called his disciples.

I too heard Jesus teach us about God's love, and show us that love as he healed those sick in body and the sick in spirit:

I watch him give sight to the blind, and heard their weeping as they looked into the face of their husband or wife for the first time.

I watched as those who had never heard anything, heard their child's laughter, their faces lit with joy.

I heard the gravelly voices of those who had never been able to speak, as they fell to Jesus' feet with thanksgiving and praise in their mouths instead of unbroken silence.

There were so many more of us than the twelve disciples, many of us followed and came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, sent by God to save us all.

During those years that Jesus walked on this earth my husband and I were at home in Emmaus, or in Jerusalem to hear Jesus teach, or walking from town to town with his followers.

As we travelled with Jesus, I would walk with my husband some of the time.

But more often you would find me with the women who followed Jesus: those who gave their time and money to support Jesus' work, and those of us who followed him because he was the Messiah walking among us.

During those years I walked many miles with Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, Susanna, Salome, and Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha, and sometimes even Jesus' mother Mary and her sister.

On the day that I am here to tell you about, it was just me and my husband Cleopas walking together, leaving Jerusalem behind us, and going home. We were going home with hearts broken, and lives shattered by all that had happened in four short days.

All we could do was talk and remember and wonder what it all meant. So much had happened in such a short time:

Jesus celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples in an upper room inside the city walls of

Jerusalem. It was the meal of our people, but that night he changed it.

Jesus took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to us.

He said: "This bread is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Later, after supper he took the cup of wine and he blessed it too, and passed it to us saying:

"This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

None of us would ever think of the Passover meal the same way again.

He had taken it and made it his own.

After the Passover meal, Jesus walked with us out of the city and up to the Garden of Gethsemane as he often did. He went away from us and prayed the heartbroken prayers of a man who knew what was coming, even if the rest of us didn't.

And then Judas, and our priests and teachers, and Roman soldiers arrived and arrested him there in the Garden of Gethsemane.

As if he had ever done anything but tell us about God, and live out the love of God in our midst.

By the afternoon of the next day he had been beaten and whipped, he had been tried and judged, and condemned to die on a cross.

We were there on Friday, with those who followed his slow tortured steps outside the city walls.

We watched him be lifted up onto the cross; we heard his last words,
we saw his agony, we saw him die there between two thieves.

He was an innocent man, a prophet mighty in all that he said and did.

We stood at the foot of his cross, barely able to believe that his life,
and our lives as we'd known them, were gone, murdered,
destroyed.

How do you give words to that kind of devastation and
despair?

These were the things that Cleopas and I were talking about as we walked the seven miles back to Emmaus.

I don't know where the man came from. We were so caught up in trying to understand what had happened between Thursday evening and that Sunday afternoon that a crowd could have surrounded us and we wouldn't have noticed them.

The first time we noticed him was when he said to us: "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

Well that just stopped us in the middle of the road. Neither of us knew what to do or say, the sadness engulfed us as we tried to find the words.

Finally, Cleopas collected himself enough to answer: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" The grief in his voice as he asked this question would have broken your heart. How could there be anyone in all of Israel who didn't know?

"What things?" the stranger asked us.

So together we told him

the things about Jesus of Nazareth,

who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,

and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

We told him: "We had hoped that he was the one to save Israel.

But now it is the third day since all these things took place.

And yet, we told him, this morning some women of our group astounded us.

They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive.

Well of course some of those who were gathered together with us went immediately to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, just as the women had said; but none of them saw Jesus.

Then this stranger said to us, "Can't you understand? How can you be so slow to believe all that the prophets said?

Didn't you know that the Messiah would have to suffer before he was given his glory?"

Then he started with Moses and all the prophets and he interpreted them for us, explaining all that they said about the Messiah.

It may sound like he was lecturing us, but it didn't feel like that to us. Instead he was giving us the gift of seeing and hearing again all that Jesus was meant to be.

We had resumed walking as he talked. By the time he was done we had entered Emmaus and were walking toward our home. It was nearly the end of the day; the darkness was coming, so Cleopas and I both urged him to stay the night with us.

Anyone would have done the same, our God commands us to welcome the stranger and feed and care for him

We couldn't let him continue down that road alone, it wouldn't be safe; it was just too late in the day.

Luckily some of our friends in Jerusalem had baked bread before we'd left, and they had sent some home with us for our dinner. ¹

We lit the lamp, washed our hands for the meal, and brought the simple meal of wine and the bread to the table.

The stranger asked if he could bless the meal, and we said yes of course.

And that's when it happened.

He took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to us.

We were instantly back in the upper room and the Passover meal, where Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to us.

It was Jesus who had shared the journey with us to Emmaus,

it was Jesus who was sharing our meal with us,

it was Jesus who was alive, just as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women had said. (Luke 24:10)

Then in that very moment that we knew that it was Jesus who was sharing this meal with us, he vanished. After all that had happened in the last few days, it somehow didn't seem strange to us at all.

First, we both starting talking. We agreed that we should have known it was him.

We should have known because it felt as though our hearts were on fire within us as he explained the scriptures to us.

We both had known that we were hearing the living word of God as he spoke.

It was as though the truth of his words warmed us from the inside out, changing our hearts.

The next moment all we knew was that we had to get back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven disciples and all the men and women who had followed Jesus.

Gathering our cloaks, we raced to put our sandals back on, and we ran back down the road.

Our joy, our unsurpassed joy, made the miles disappear.

Soon we were back with Jesus' followers. As we entered the room, our story waiting to burst from our mouths, they all started talking together: "Jesus our Lord is alive, the Lord is risen indeed, and Simon Peter has seen him! Jesus is alive!"

"We know, we know!" we shouted, "We have seen him too!"

And then the story poured out of us:

meeting him on the road and not knowing who he was,

his explanation of the scriptures,

and what happened when he took the bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to us to eat.

That was when we knew, we knew it was Jesus and he was alive.

Over the next days, Jesus appeared to the eleven and to the rest of us. We never knew when he would appear, or how long he would stay. He would spend time with us, talk with us, answer questions, share meals with us, and then be gone again.

And then the day came when we were seeing him for the last time. The heavens opened and he ascended to God. He promised he would return to us some day. But we never saw him again.

And yet, we did see him. It was just in a new way;

a way that he had given to us.

We would always know that he was with us.

We would be gathered for a meal together and someone would take the bread, bless it and break it and give it out, and he was there with us again.

Bread taken, blessed, broken and given, the cup passed from person to person and Jesus was there in our midst.

No longer seen with our eyes, but known with our hearts.

He had given us a meal to share; a meal we passed on to our children,

and they to their children after them, and so on, down through the generations.

And now, every time people gather together in Jesus' name

and bread is taken, blessed, broken and given, and the cup shared,

we will recognize that he is there.

In the simple meal of bread and the cup,

Jesus is alive,

he is present
broken, blessed and poured out for us, and for the entire world.

¹ Idea for bread baked by others in Jerusalem from Sharla, RIRevShev@aol.com, Midrash 08-04, "Blinders" April 15, 2007,