

Sermon: Joy in any Circumstance
3 Easter, Year A
Luke 24:13-35

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Lord, Jesus, stay with us!

Today's Gospel passage is often referred to as the "Road to Emmaus." The scenario is that a couple of Jesus' disciples are walking down a road toward a village called Emmaus. Jesus has died and they are very likely feeling terribly dejected, forlorn, sad, disillusioned, and disoriented. "What now?" They must be asking themselves. "Where are we to turn?" But "while they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." What is up with that? How is it that they couldn't recognize him? Weren't these his disciples?

But as they spend time with Jesus, as they talk and listen to him, as they break bread with him, something changes; Luke says, "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." You can almost hear their surprise and delight, their joy, as they say to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...?"

Today is the second in a preaching series on joy. For the two disciples who were on the road to Emmaus, their joy occurred right in the middle of difficult circumstances. Think about it. As disciples, as followers of the prophet Jesus, their world had come to a screeching halt as they saw it. Everything had changed for them overnight. Their leader had been crucified; he was dead. And so were their hopes. They were left confused and agitated, not knowing what to do next. But the resurrected Christ changed everything. When they recognized him on the road on their journey of grief and hopelessness, their hope was restored and the deep joy within them was resurrected so that they felt compelled to share it with other members of the community.

And how is it that we as followers of Jesus don't always recognize Jesus in our midst? Maybe we need each other, our gift of community, to recognize Jesus among us? Thursday night, a group from Emmanuel went to lead our quarterly Vespers service at Augusta Correctional Center in Craigsville. There were close to 100 inmates there. The room was full. We worshipped together, Randy on banjo, George on guitar, Kit, Susan, Jackie and me praying, singing and laughing with the inmates.

After we finished the service, a young man named Joshua came up to me, "Shelby, I have to tell you something. Last year I killed my mother and my father. And I tried to kill myself by hanging myself with a bed sheet. (and he showed me his neck where the marks were) When you (all) come in here to the prison you are Jesus. You know where it says (in the Bible) 'I was in prison and you came to visit me.' (Matthew 25:36) You need to know that when you all come here it is a light piercing the darkness. I have to tell you this because if you ever question whether it is worth your time or effort, you need to know it is. You are Jesus for me."

Up until that moment, even though I knew in theory we were visiting people in prison who had done some pretty horrific things, (this was our 13th visit) I had never had anyone actually tell me what they had done that had landed them in prison. Joshua's disclosure/confession helped me to

better understand just how dark his world is. And yet he was saying that in Jesus' being with him, there was hope in the midst of sorrow, even joy in the midst of terribly difficult circumstances.

Later in the week I had lunch with someone who has stage 4 cancer. He shared with the group that he had actually come to see his cancer as a blessing. When he told his mother this, she began to cry and said, "You are going to have to help me understand how this awful cancer is a blessing." Now he didn't tell us that it had anything to do with faith in God. I don't know what his religious or spiritual beliefs are, but he did say the cancer had opened him to the kindnesses of others and to letting go of the things that he just didn't need in his life. The man carried a beautiful and profound joy with him that didn't negate the difficult circumstances but did transcend them.

In this stage of spring we have God's message of joy in the midst of death all around us if we open our eyes to see. We can simply look in a garden to see new life. In the middle of those dead branches of last year's hydrangea bushes, have you noticed the tender new leaves popping out after these great rains? It is sometimes said that flowers are God's laughter. Nature reveals God's plans for new life again and again.

Just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we will have moments or periods of despair; we will have difficult circumstances. We will do and say things we aren't proud of, even horrific things sometimes. Some of us will be diagnosed with cancer or other diseases. Things we plant in our gardens will die. Life isn't always easy.

The disciples probably didn't even know how important their words to Jesus were, when they said: "Stay with us!" Jesus has chosen to stay with us, you and me. New life awaits. Whatever the circumstances, can we trust that Jesus is with us? May joy abound!

Amen.