

Easter 3
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As we continue to celebrate this season of Easter and hear the stories of the witnesses to the resurrection, I can't help but think about what an emotional roller coaster it must have been for those first followers of Jesus. The disciples had so many highs and lows, and times of confusion in their efforts to understand and follow their divine teacher. How many times did they assume they were on the right track only to learn that they were following their own will, rather than Jesus. And then, after Jesus had been crucified, I can't help but wonder how important it must have been for them to have each other in such a time of disillusionment and despair. What an important time to have a friend or partner that you could count on to be there with you, to share your emotional and spiritual pain, to share your confusion, someone to help you sort things out. Friends are so very important. And friends that we share our spiritual side with, those whom we share our religious convictions and experiences with, are usually among our closest friends.

In Michael Foss' book "Power Surge" he identifies six marks of discipleship, six fundamental activities that Christians need to engage in. Now most of these are pretty obvious, daily prayer, weekly worship, Bible study, serving others, and giving of our time, talents, and treasures, but the one that we may not immediately acknowledge, but is so essential in the life of a Christian is developing spiritual friendships. Developing spiritual friendships, or the building of our community, our support for the body of Christ. As we place our attention on this, as something to work on, we must ask ourselves, "How many spiritual friends do we have? How many do we need?"

Spiritual friends pray FOR each other and pray WITH each other. They share insights into scripture, and help one another reflect on the ways God is present and active in our lives. We are to encourage each other to form these spiritual friendships and to agree to hold each other accountable to practice the other marks of discipleship. Not as a way of keeping tabs on one another, but as a method of genuine support and encouragement. We learn from each other's experience, and from the sharing of our thoughts and feelings. And we can be tremendously helpful when we walk with each other through our inevitable difficult times and our "dark nights of the soul."

The two disciples in our gospel text were no doubt in one of those times as they took flight in their journey to Emmaus. These two were grieving the loss of their Master and teacher, Jesus. We can imagine the sadness, the disappointment, the hopelessness. And we can feel the heaviness of their hearts. The movement Jesus started was over, and they were consumed with their own feelings and disillusionment. To them the cross, spelled failure. The crucifixion was a loss of hope. And so they turned their backs to Jerusalem, and began on their way. It was time to get back to life as it once was. Even though some women of their group had claimed that Jesus was alive, these two had enough and turned away to pick up the pieces of their lives.

And then a stranger joined them on their journey, but they were too consumed with their own thoughts and feelings, and they did not recognize him. They were still replaying the recent events in their minds, with the same disappointing results. The redeemer of Israel they were looking for, was dead, dead for three days now. These disciples were filled with uncertainties and they still hadn't found what they were searching for. They had hoped that Jesus might be the one.

And aren't we like that too, all too often consumed with ourselves and our own feelings. Stubborn and resistant to perceiving the world from another perspective, understanding events only in our own terms and for our own purposes. What stands in the way of our faith, is our belief in an image of Christ, that does not describe Jesus. Our expectations of Jesus, can blind us from seeing the real thing.

But isn't that what our culture teaches us, to rely on our own experience, to make our own evaluations about what is right and wrong, to turn our back to what has gone on before, to interpret the world, only from our own viewpoint, critical of, and doubting everything we see. In the post-modern world of today, each of us is free to conceive the world in whatever way we wish. There is nowhere to go beyond our own opinions, no appeal beyond our very own self, with our personally constructed view of the world. Don't give us stories of hundreds or thousands of years ago, every culture has its own stories. What is real is based on what we decide truth to be.

And if our culture hasn't hardened our hearts, surely the events in the news every day will. Our world is full of suffering from the coronavirus and its economic impact on so many peoples' livelihoods. Our world is full of divisiveness as our leaders play politics when real answers are needed. Our world is full of placing blame on others when there has never been a better time for us to cast aside our differences and work together as one. How do we keep hope alive when peace and goodwill seems to be an impossible goal for the human race. Did Jesus' coming make any difference in the whole scheme of things? Do our prayers go unanswered?

Whether we are in the midst of our grieving and hopelessness, or in the midst of our wealth and prosperity, it can be difficult to recognize the risen Jesus among us. It can be difficult to find the proper understanding of scriptures. And we are not likely to find just what we are looking for. But Jesus doesn't give up on his disciples who are "foolish and slow of heart to believe."

In spite of all that we do, our Lord comes to us. Even when we are looking at our Lord Jesus face to face, like those travelers to Emmaus, saying "Are you the only one who does not know the things that are taking place in these days?" Yet he still comes to us and he walks with us. Even when we can't recognize him, even when we can't see our Lord at work in our troubles and the tragedies of humanity, he is with us and is at work, creating and forming a future that we can't imagine.

And he came to the two disciples even when they had turned their backs on the first claims of Jesus' resurrection. This apparent stranger who walked with them turned out

to be their risen Lord, Jesus Christ, and Jesus transformed these two disheartened people into apostles with burning hearts, hearts ablaze with the good news of the gospel. Energizing people to witness to the hope of the resurrection in Jesus Christ. Burning hearts pumping new life into people so they can give their lives away for others.

The disciples' burning hearts turned their hopelessness into hopefulness. Their sadness into joy. Their grief and confusion into explosive excitement and sheer determination to share their experience with the other disciples in Jerusalem. With their hope renewed, and a clear focus, and a sense of urgency, there was no time to waste, this good news would change the world forever.

And Jesus prepared them for their task ahead in a very unique way, for he led them from the known into the unknown. He accompanied them, listened to them, and gently guided them through the Scriptures so they could understand the current events in light of the past, and then revealed God's plan for the future. And Jesus used the usual to reveal the unusual. The stranger remained a stranger until dinnertime. And when the stranger took the bread and blessed it, and then took the cup and gave thanks, just as they were used to, then they became aware that the Lord was with them. Their minds had been opened with the Word and now they were able to recognize him in a meal made holy, and their weak hearts were transformed into burning hearts.

What a gift these two disciples received on that road to Emmaus. A gift that is still available for you and me. Jesus wants to be our companion on the road we travel. He has people to bless, lives to touch, hearts to transform. He calls us all and invites us to be a part of his revolutionary movement to transform the world into burning hearts for God. Jesus wants us to be his disciples, ready to follow and willing to lead others to a relationship with God. He will open our minds to understand his word. The word will be a light to our path, and his holy meal will sustain us on our journeys.

And we also find Christ in our companions, the gift of each other that we have to nourish our spiritual friendships and sing our praises to God. Jesus isn't looking for supermen or wonderwomen. He is looking for ordinary people, open-hearted women and men to receive God's gifts of grace, forgiveness, and love – and then pass it on to others. Ordinary people like you and me, and like the two on the road to Emmaus, we can be empowered by God to do extraordinary things. We can be empowered to have "burning hearts" as we accompany each other on the road of life. Amen.