

Wednesday of Easter Week – Year C – April 7, 2010 - Homily

Acts 3:1-10; Psalm 105:1-8; Luke 24:13-25

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I know this might disappoint one or two of you, but I'm not a big Willie Nelson fan! However, all the time I was preparing tonight's homily, I kept hearing his voice and the first line of the song, *On the Road Again*. So out of curiosity, I looked up the lyrics. At the third verse, the lyrics demand another look. "On the road again...Insisting that the world keep turning our way...."

Our two friends in tonight's Gospel lesson may have felt the same way. We are picking up the story right after the women have found the empty tomb and heard the angels' advice. The women have run back to tell the other disciples, and Peter has also checked out the empty tomb, although he and the others have not yet come to the same faithful conclusion as the women. We are told that it is the same day. We are not told why two of the disciples might be walking to Emmaus, but Luke may be hinting that yet another of Zechariah's prophecies is coming true, "Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered" (Zechariah 13:7). Why stay? It was great while it lasted, but Jesus is dead, even if His body is missing. All these two disciples know is that Jesus, the prophet mighty in word and deed, has been executed by the Roman authorities, and that means their own lives are probably in danger.

They bid the others farewell and head off back to Emmaus. They are not silent in their grief, but talking with one another about everything that has happened over the last three days. At least they think they have the whole story. Fear and grief are almost certainly clouding their judgment. Then a stranger joins them – no one they recognize – and he asks them what they are discussing. Cleopas and his friend are astonished by the stranger's lack of knowledge about what has happened in Jerusalem: how their hopes that Jesus might be the one to redeem Israel have been crushed. Even inasmuch as they proclaim Jesus as a prophet, and admit the women have told them that He is risen, grief and fear have almost certainly closed their eyes and ears as well. Their world of hope and promise has collapsed. Without Jesus' presence, they are somehow less than they really are, with hearts and minds shrinking fearfully, and turning inward again to their old human habits of self-reliance, and limited understanding.

Indeed, in one sense Willie Nelson is right – Cleopas and his walking companion **are** insisting that the world "keep turning our way" at least on the road they are now walking. Jesus, however, is not content to let these two disciples walk away from the path that He has laid out and prepared for them. Still a stranger to our grief-stricken friends, He says, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" For these faithful Jewish men, their own worldview of Messiah's coming looked nothing like the picture of suffering and death on a cross. Just like the women at the tomb, who were prompted by the angels to remember what Jesus Himself prophesied, these two need help to understand all the prophetic revelations concerning the Messiah. Luke leaves us with no doubt that Jesus is a prophet like Moses, and more, that He is the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed one of God -- vindicated and glorified by God, in His resurrection.

The next scene reveals even more about Jesus as Savior and Lord. Not only is the whole of Scripture filled with prophetic messages about Him, but there is nothing forced about coming to faith in Christ Jesus. The word is out there to be heard and shared for all those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, but faith must be accepted as a gift of God. We must all

invite Jesus into our hearts, because our God is humble and gentle, not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, and so Jesus appears to walk on, as the two disciples reach the village of Emmaus. Then we read, “But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us....’” This is not just some stranger who was an interesting companion for part of their journey. Even though they have not yet recognized the risen Lord, Cleopas and his friend have not forgotten the importance of extending hospitality to strangers. This hospitality is deeply embedded in first century Judean culture. Times have changed. While our culture is one of great generosity, how many of us would meet an interesting stranger, and after an hour or two of conversation, insist that they come home with us for supper?

Having received an invitation, Jesus does not decline to enter into the possibility of a deeper relationship with these two disciples. Having been invited in, Jesus naturally assumes the role of the host at dinner. The Eucharistic significance of Jesus blessing, breaking, and sharing the bread is evident. Henri Nouwen puts it this way, “Every time we invite Jesus into our homes, that is to say, into our life... and offer Him a place ... at our table, he takes the bread and the cup and says, ‘Take and eat, this is my body. Take and drink, this is my blood. Do this to remember me.’” The moment that Cleopas and his friend recall the events of Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the multitude, and Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, their eyes are opened. It is the moment of faith in which we no longer need Jesus’ physical presence in order to see and understand, but know Jesus’ presence within us in the intimate and mutual bond of communion.

Nouwen goes on to explain, “The Eucharistic presence is first of all a presence through the word.” Our friends would not have recognized the stranger as Jesus without the revelation of Scripture. Therefore, “without the presence in the word, we are not able to recognize the presence of God in the breaking of the bread.” In our own faith traditions, the work of the people, our liturgy, is structured around the liturgy of the word, and the liturgy of the Holy Sacrament. We hear the story of God’s salvation every week in the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, and the New Testament. We share our own stories and become more and more aware of how our little stories are part of the grand narrative. In the sharing of Holy Communion we enter into the act of remembrance for all that Christ has done for us. Yet there is one more step.

Having come to faith in Christ Jesus as Messiah, the two disciples immediately head back to Jerusalem to share the good news. The witness of the women at the tomb is affirmed. They also find out that the risen Lord has since appeared to Simon. Our lives of faith in community begin with sharing the word, and breaking bread together, and they continue in mission. The third part of our liturgy is the blessing and sending. With no apology to Willie Nelson, as Christians, we are called back into the world with our hearts burning, not to make the world keep turning *our* way or to just be on *any* road, but to offer a new way in Christ, and a path to the hope and joy of salvation.

The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!