

Sacred and Profane No More!

When the members of the early church talked about the resurrection of Jesus, they usually did so from their own experiences; and not only of the resurrection itself, but also from their life together as a Christian community. And the central feature of these stories was often the Eucharist, the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name. And in a way it makes sense, because Holy Communion was the last thing that Jesus did with his disciples before his death, it was the first thing that newly baptized Christians did as they began their life in Christ, and it was one of the central act of the Christian community as it gathered, week after week, to celebrate the victory it had found in Jesus.

Given all this, therefore, it may not come as a surprise to any of you that the story we heard in this morning's gospel reading, was, for those first Christians, more than simply a story about how two men had a chance meeting with the resurrected Jesus. It's also a story that was intended to describe the shape and meaning of the Holy Eucharist. Therefore, I would like to take a brief look at this story, and see how these two themes work together, and what it might mean to us today.

Our gospel begins with a couple of travelers who really don't know much about anything. Somewhere along their journey, a third man shows up and begins walking with them. They don't know who he is, but the three men begin talking about the Bible, and because the stranger really knows his scripture, the two travelers are finally able to understand the meaning of so much in scripture.

This part of the story, I believe, corresponds to the first half of our Sunday worship experience, which we call the Liturgy of the Word. Now, what transpires in our gospel story is apparently not enough to really clue the travelers in to what's happening. They still don't recognize the stranger. And maybe what this is telling us is that the Bible, all by itself, and even really good Bible study, is not enough to make Jesus known to us. And if that's the case, it's an important point.

The second part of our gospel's story takes place when the two travelers invite the stranger to join them for a meal. When the food arrives, the stranger takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the two travelers. It was an action which duplicated what Jesus did at the Last Supper, and the two travelers are suddenly able to recognize the stranger for who he really is: the resurrected Jesus.

This part of the story, I believe, corresponds to the second half of our Sunday worship experience, which we call the Liturgy of the Table. And here we reenact what Jesus did numerous times with his disciples, and with so many other groups that gathered around him. It

was an act through which he revealed something of his character and nature. And it was an act wherein he made himself known.

The members of the early church understood, and appreciated – after the scripture had been heard, and the bread had been broken and shared – this special gift of having their eyes opened and discovering that the risen Lord was with them. And they knew about it because it had happened to them! And that’s why they remembered the story about the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. They wanted to make sure that future generations would remember what it means to live in a world that has forever been made different because of the resurrection.

An interesting part of this morning’s gospel story is when Jesus simply vanishes, because that, too, I think, is important. Because, with Jesus suddenly gone, those two travelers had a choice: they could simply sit there, looking and feeling dumbfounded, or they could get up and do something. For the experience they had just had changed them: it changed the way they looked at the world; it changed the way they approached scripture; it even changed the way they looked at their future. So, rather than just sit there, they did something. They went and told the other disciples what had happened. Because, in the end, Jesus didn’t return from the dead simply to give us something to sit and think about. Rather, Jesus came back to empower his disciples, his followers, his church – us! – to carry on his work in the world.

And so, we need to remember this same thing when we celebrate the Holy Eucharist. An important part of what we do when we gather each Sunday is listening and learning. But we also gather to experience something ... or, rather, someone. We experience the risen Lord in the bread and wine, and that encounter puts everything else we do here into its proper context. We are reminded. We are renewed. And we are sent out. In fact, I think it would be fair to say that the Eucharist is a sacrament of sending.

If you’ve been a part of this parish for more than a few seasons, then you know that I like to change the shape of our worship experience with each new season. I do so, mainly to keep things fresh, but also, and especially, to keep our worship from becoming rote. But one change I haven’t made in a long while was the prayer after communion. The prayer we’ll be using for the next several weeks – if not longer – is really good for this season, and the part of that prayer I like best is this:

“And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.”

In fact, and as far as our spiritual journeys are concerned, there may be nothing we do this week that is as important as what we’re doing here this morning. Because we need to be reminded, week after week, that we never know where or when we’ll encounter the risen Lord. And we never know in whom we may encounter him. And with this understanding, all of a sudden, we stop trying to divide the world, and the people we encounter, into those that are “sacred” and those that are “profane.” Because any place, and any person, that reveals the risen Lord to us, is, in some way, holy.

Once upon a time, two travelers encountered the risen Lord. They didn't know who he was at first. But he explained some things, and that helped. However, it wasn't until they sat down and shared a meal that they were able to see that Jesus had been in their midst all along. And their story is our story as well.

May we all have our eyes opened by what we do here this morning. And may our eyes be opened to see the risen Lord, not only in this place, and in the people we see around us, but also in all of the places and people of the world.