

Hospitality and Hope
Luke 24:13-35
Psalm 146
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What Chris Elwood said about the “Doubting Thomas” story last Friday may be said of this week’s Gospel lesson for Sunday, too—or, at least, some things he said. Like the Thomas story, the Emmaus story is well known and welcome, though it may be perhaps a more comfortable story for us than Thomas’ demand to see and touch the Risen Christ, which, at least for me, always draws me close to Thomas’ shoulder, tempted to egg him on and say, “Yeah, me too. I want to see and touch, if I’m to believe.”

Doubt and seeing and believing play a big part in the Emmaus story, too. But, in this story, the doubters are less confrontational, less demanding than Thomas, and they, curiously enough, are *kept* from seeing until a moment of surprising revelation—then they see and believe. Like Thomas, the two disciples traveling to Emmaus were not convinced by the empty tomb story, either—neither the astonishing testimony—unbelievable, really—of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, James’ mother, and the other women, bedazzled as they were by the sight of two strangers who told them “he is risen” then chided them: “Didn’t he tell you all this must happen—the suffering, dying, and rising again?” until they remembered Jesus’ words. Nor did they believe those disciples who, doubtful or not, went to the tomb to confirm, perhaps, or maybe experience, the women’s story and saw the empty tomb for themselves—but, Luke says ironically, no sign of Jesus. But, as with Thomas, for our two disciples on the way, the day’s not over yet. It’s still Easter. So let’s join Cleopas and his brother in Christ who goes unnamed in

this story and walk to Emmaus. If nothing else, we'll get away from Thomas which, after at least three sermons—maybe more—in the last two weeks, may be a welcome journey.

We're not quite ready to go yet. I want to tell you something about the context for my thinking about this story this time, because, like you, I've heard it before, preached on it before. But I was in a different place this time, and it's made a difference in what I heard this time. If you've looked ahead to Sunday's lectionary texts, or plan to, you found the Gospel text from Luke we're thinking about. But the Psalm that's there is 116, not 146, the one we heard a few minutes ago. To tell you the truth, I've been haunted by Psalm 146 for the last two weeks, and it became, against my will, the listening post for hearing the Emmaus story, a kind of confessional in which doubt and sorrow and promise and relief and joy all banged together, all looking for good news and forgiveness and healing and food for a continuing God-walk, as liberation theologian Frederick Herzog liked to call our way of being disciples.

Some of you will know this story. In the class Brad Wigger and I are teaching called "Growing in the Life of Faith," we've been reading Psalms together, choosing a Psalm and really listening to it for a week—one psalm for a week—listening, as Deuteronomy suggests we do, as we go in and go out, when we get up and go about the day's busy-ness, when we lie down at night, talking about the psalm with each other, wrapping ourselves in it, letting it draw us into its words and images and hopes and tears and sadness and confidence and praise and joy—the whole colorful palette of emotions. We've been reading and listening to the psalms and strangely and marvelously, miraculously you could say, they've been listening to us, reading us and—here I can speak only for myself—reshaping me in multiple ways. Recently the psalm that had its

way with us was Psalm 146, with its celebration of the Creator God's constant, faithful care for the poor and the hungry, the imprisoned and the oppressed, the strangers, the widow and the orphan, the righteous and, yes, even the wicked whose path, the psalmist says, God "bends" to make it hard to travel on, so that, redemptively, a better way may be found. Hearing a psalm like this one can stir dangerous memories. Angela, who graciously has let me tell this story, filled with feeling as we talked about this psalm, with the honesty of faith, called the psalm on its apparent lie. "I want to believe it," she said, "I do. But I do not see the hungry fed or justice for the oppressed or prisoners freed." The promises of the psalm *do* look empty; Angela's right. And it's not enough to say, "*some* justice is done; *some* who are hungry get food; *some* who are imprisoned find their way to freedom; *some* strangers and widows and orphans are protected. The Psalm is more categorical than that, its promises bigger than that. It claims a new reality, one in which the Holy One, "who keeps faith forever," is sovereign and can be trusted to make "all things new," just as the Psalm claims. So why, we wondered, are things the way they are and not as God intends them? And, rightly, we said it has to do with us, who we are, what we do and don't do. And someone remembered Matthew 25, with its challenging and, yes, in that context, even judgmental, charge: "As you have [fed the least of these, clothed the least of these, comforted the least of these], you have done it to me." Good news, like that of Psalm 146 or Jesus, is promising but it is also confronting and demanding. And that's what happened to us in class, I think: Good News uncovered pain and anger and disappointment, and then demanded we who hear it and see it participate in the transformation of the bad news that darkens the days of many—maybe most—into the Good News God intends for the world God made and loves and keeps on making into

something new and whole and tearless. The class ended, but the Psalm has not let go of me. So I took it with me on the way to Emmaus because it wanted to go and because I had to.

Sadly, the world of Emmaus was not unlike our world so painfully exposed by the Psalm's imagination. Two disciples shuffling along in the dust between Jerusalem and the middle of no where, a village, Emmausville, 6 miles or so away from the sorrow and pain and violence and the shuddering events of Jesus' death in the city that has a history of disappointing God's promises. Jerusalem is not just the city of Jesus' death, of course. It is also the city of refuge for the poor in search of work, some forced to beg; it is the city of refuge for widows and orphans, society's vulnerable, looking for protection, and it is the city for those looking for justice and for politicians and religious leaders trying to find a way to keep peace in an occupied territory under the control of a foreign power, with the twin costs of occupation: a shattered economy and stubborn insurgency.

Emmaus has no particular attraction, none at least that the story cares to comment on. It is a place to get away from Jerusalem to; it's no where in particular, just a get-away, the end of a ride on a Sunday afternoon when you can't stand being in the house any longer. For Cleopas and his friend, it is a place to which they are carried by grief and sadness and empty hopes. They are like those whom Psalm 146 calls "bowed down," depressed, the kind of folks the Psalm says God "lifts up," literally, "raises [their] heads." Emmaus and the Psalmist touch but, for now, in our story, the disciple's sadness is unrelieved and shoulders stoop and eyes stare into dust just ahead of heavy feet, as they talk softly about "all these things that had happened."

Out of nowhere, the Risen Jesus comes and joins them. Luke lets us in on the secret: we know this traveler is Jesus, but the disciples do not—something that’s been true throughout the Gospel. The text says, puzzlingly, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Were they too caught up in their sorrowful conversation to recognize him, their heads too “bowed down”? Did they not recognize him because he was the last person on earth they expected to see? Or did God have a hand in this, *keeping* them from recognizing Jesus, because the time’s not right just yet? If that’s the case, then there go lots of good sermons about how we don’t recognize Jesus in the strangers we meet because we are too selfish or sinful or uncaring or preoccupied with our own interests. But, at the moment, for the story, Jesus remains a stranger to the disciples, who call him just that when they ask him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” And so they fill him in; ironically, they tell the Risen Christ the Gospel story, sort of. They tell him about Jesus whose prophetic ministry was powerful in word and deed, and we know what they’re talking about: Jesus’ words and deeds that healed and made whole, that set people free, that fed hungry people, that gave hopeless people hope—we know what they’re talking about. These poor, unloved, oppressed, suffering, bowed-down people are the characters of the Gospel stories, loved to death by God in Christ. And they are also those about whom Psalm 146 says God cares faithfully and transformatively. The Sovereign Holy One the Psalmist sings Emmaus knows as Jesus, the One mighty in word and deed, handed over, crucified, dead, and buried. But these disciples can go no further. Their Gospel ends in death and disappointment, dashed hopes—“We had hoped, we had so hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” We had hoped with our lives, we had hoped with everything we

were and are. But now, he's crucified and dead and gone, and with him goes hoped-for redemption." It is not Easter for these two disciples, just the third day after a terrible disaster that snuffed the life of one mighty in word and deed hopelessly—a prophet, not a redeemer. Israel is not free: the hungry are not fed, the oppressed do not receive justice, the stranger and the widow and the orphan are not safe, nothing has changed, really. A few have been helped, yes, but no reign of God here, no redemption. We are trapped between the hope of Psalm 146, the hope for redemption, and the present pain and sorrow with all its power of pull toward hopelessness.

But there's more to the Gospel. And more to the story of Emmaus. Thank God. And the stranger knows the rest; indeed, the stranger *is* the rest. So the stranger binds their sorrow and hopelessness in the promise and purposefulness of God. Jesus' suffering and death is itself redeemed in resurrection, the word of life the disciples cannot yet bring themselves to say. They are, as the stranger says, "slow to believe" and no wonder: all evidence points to the contrary. They are, the stranger says, "fools," but their foolishness, the Greek text hints, is really "unknowing," "ignorance" that's costing them dearly. "Unknowing" which the stranger means to redeem.

A simple evening meal becomes the means of Eucharist. Redemption begins with generous hospitality: the disciples insist the stranger share their meal and shelter, fulfilling in their invitation God's intention, written in Israel's covenant, to care for the stranger for, as Johanna Bos reminds us, God has the heart of a stranger. Here that is literally true in this story of the Risen Christ incarnate in a stranger offered hospitality and memory draws us back to the strangers at Abraham and Sarah's tent, too. At Emmaus the stranger is invited guest, invited for no other reason than need: the day is nearly done;

night is coming; food and shelter are needed; the stranger is homeless. But in a redemptive twist, guest mysteriously becomes host; and the one who's offered bread took it, and blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples. And in a moment of Real Presence, with the breaking of the bread, the hungry are fed, the mourning are comforted, the bowed down are raised up and there is reason to hope. With the breaking of the bread, they recognized him. The Gospel is complete and they can say what they could not say before: "the Lord has risen, indeed." The moment does not last; it didn't on the mountain, either. It doesn't every Friday when we come to this table, either. It didn't last: Jesus vanished, going as quickly and mysteriously as he came to them.

Vanished but not gone. Luke's story means to help his hearers with their questions about what to do now that Jesus is gone. The living Christ remains—that's what the two disciples asked him to do—in the Gospel preached and the bread broken and shared with one another and with strangers, and hungry, hurting, vulnerable, and hopeless people like those whom Luke gathers around the Heavenly Banquet table he imagines earlier in the Gospel. The Risen Christ invites to the table everyone who is hungry for a satisfying life and longs for freedom, who still dares hope, despite a painful present, that redemption has come, that God does, as my insistent Psalm claims, "keep faith forever" with God's promise to mend a broken world for good. The Christ who bids us come to share in resurrection bread bids us also take food enough from here to feed hungering and thirsting people whose haunting omnipresence would make resurrection and redemption a lie—those people of Psalm 146 who live around us and with us and far away and not so far away who long for justice and peace and love and a good reason to get up in the morning. This is the Risen Christ's table and he breaks bread for everyone

and no one must go hungry. It is a table where mourning is turned into joy and oppression into freedom; it is a setting-out-place for love and justice and hope. Here we are invited; here we are empowered; here we are commissioned. Come, now, then go fulfill the promises of God, for Christ's sake.