

Homily for use in EaND Synod congregations

April 6, 2008

Synod Assembly Sunday

“The Emmaus Road”

Luke 24:13-35

No one really knows where the town of Emmaus was. I think four villages currently claim the distinction. Nobody knows much about Cleopas or the other disciple who was with him on the road to Emmaus that Easter Day. But Emmaus will always be remembered, because Luke preserved for us the encounter on that road between Jesus and two crestfallen men.

You remember the story. They were crushed. They had pinned their hopes on Jesus, and now he was dead – and all was lost. I don't know what was taking them to Emmaus. Maybe they just needed to clear their heads and get out of town.

In any case, as they plodded along and tried to make sense of that awful last week, a stranger fell in with them. As they rehashed what had happened to Jesus and to them, the stranger asked, “What are you talking about?” I don't think they were very polite or patient, and I don't know what they were thinking when the stranger began to tell them what it all meant.

I would love to have been there, listening, as Jesus retold the familiar stories, but from the vantage point of the power of the resurrection rather than miserable defeat on the cross.

Finally, they recognized Jesus. Why it took so long, I don't know. But it seems fitting, because it took the disciples (and you and me, too, for that matter) a long time to figure everything else out about Jesus.

But then something odd happened. As soon as they recognized Jesus, as soon as they “got it”, as soon as they made sense of what he was saying – Jesus disappeared. Just as the disciples were ready to say “My Lord and my God”, and latch onto Jesus again, he vanished. He left. Can you imagine that? Jesus went to all that work, went all that way with them, staying with them until they finally caught on – and then, when they did see, he left.

Was he just toying with them? Or teasing them? I don't think so. In fact, I think this “detail” of Jesus leaving is important. Jesus stayed with them until they understood, even when it took longer than it should have. Jesus was in their presence as long as they needed. But his leaving might be just as important.

Jesus is not our private possession. He will stay with us, with great patience and perseverance, as long as we need. But he will not turn into our possession. It is so tempting to want to capture Jesus, to put him in a box, to possess him, to have him under control. But it can't be that way. It's bad enough when we are tempted to do that with our friends and family, the people we care about. You know what happens when we try to “possess” another person – it ruins the relationship. Sometimes we want so desperately for somebody to care for us, or to provide what we need, that we just grab on tight and try to force the relationship into the shape we want. But you and I know that doesn't work. Nobody wants to be a possession. The old cliché, “If you love somebody let them go; if they don't come back, you never had them” is true. In any relationship of depth, it must be a mutually giving relationship one to the other. Neither one can be captured or possessed, and it is even more futile to try to possess Jesus.

Our Lord freely gives himself to us, but if we try to take him or grab him or possess him, he will vanish – as he did with Cleopas and his friend.

When Jesus did leave, after they gathered their wits, they probably looked at one another and said, “We are in possession of the greatest news anyone has ever heard. Let’s go tell the others; they will be amazed at our story.”

So they left their meal half-eaten and ran back to Jerusalem, bursting with the “scoop of the century”. They flung open the door to that second-story apartment where the disciples were still huddled, ready to astound them all, yelling “Guess what!”. They just needed a second to catch their breath from all that running, and in that momentary pause they heard their friends say, “The Lord has risen, and he appeared to Simon Peter.”

What? They got scooped. The greatest story in history and they got upstaged! If they thought they were in possession of some private and wonderful news, it took the wind right out of their sails.

But that’s the point. It is clear that Jesus is not going to be possessed. We don’t even possess the good news about him. So now, as they share their encounter on that Emmaus Road, they are sharing their story. Sharing with one another what God has done and is doing. Listening to one another, sharing their experiences and insights.

I would love to have been in that room. As they are all talking and reminiscing and realizing how often they didn’t understand, and reiterating with one another how this Resurrection changes everything. Suddenly Jesus’ words take on new depth; now the horrible nightmare of Good Friday has a new ending; words and actions that seemed strange from Jesus are making sense. Together. Together they are remembering what Jesus has said and done, and in the light of Easter are recognizing them in a new light.

I am a lot like Cleopas and the rest, and you might be too. We want to hear and see Jesus. We want to “get it” and be disciples. But sometimes we are slow to catch on. And sometimes we just get it wrong. The good news is that Jesus stays with us, as long as it takes.

Then, when I do finally see, when the epiphanies come to me, I tend to be like Cleopas and want to hang on, and sometimes treat my faith and my Lord as my possession. But Jesus won’t let that happen for you and me, any more than he did with Cleopas.

In John Masfield’s drama “The Trial of Jesus”, there is a striking passage in which Longinus, the Roman centurion in command of the soldiers at the cross that day, goes back to Pilate to hand in his report. After he has finished, Prochula, Pilate’s wife, comes in and asks to talk to the centurion. As he stands before her, she asks, “How did he die?” And he tells her. And then she says, “Do you believe he is dead?” And Longinus looks at her and says, “No, lady, I don’t.” “Then where is he?” “Let loose in the world, lady. Let loose in the world where neither Jew nor Roman can stop his truth.”

Longinus may just as well have said, “Let loose in the world. Let loose in the world where no one will possess him, and yet he will give himself and his transcendent treasures to his people in love.”

May this crucified and resurrected Jesus also come to you and me, as we walk our Emmaus roads in life. May this Jesus be let loose not only in the world, but in our community, our congregation, and in your life and mine. God be with us all. Amen.

Rob Foss