

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

January 3rd, 2016

“Serious Heart Burn”

Encountering Christ, part 1

Luke 24:13-35

Happy New Year! I am so happy to see all of you this morning, starting out the first Sunday of the year by gathering together to worship God. I hope your holidays were as special and love-filled as mine. Did you make some New Year’s Resolutions? I didn’t. I am content with just keeping the promises I made last year.

If you came here this morning, hoping to find perfect people, I am sorry to disappoint you. We are not perfect. We are human. We make mistakes. There is this rumor that goes around, this misconception that the church is full of perfect people. We’re not. But we serve a perfect God, and we believe in forgiveness and redemption, so even if you’re not a resolution-maker or keeper, you are in the right place this morning, because we all believe we have room to grow in our lives. Whether you are nine, nineteen, or ninety, we are all in this together.

As we pray, I invite you to place your hands in front of you, palms up, as if you were ready to receive what God has for you today. Would you pray with me?

Holy God, thank you for your love, your grace, and your mercy. On our own, there is no way we could stand before. Our righteousness is like filthy rags. But because of your great love, you sent us your Son, Jesus, to be our Savior, to be our righteousness. Thank you for his sacrifice. Thank you for the reminder that we are never alone. Teach us now, in these moments, how to fall more in love with Jesus, and challenge us to live only for you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Have you ever felt the need to go for a walk outside to clear your thoughts? I do that often, especially if I am preparing a message. I have discovered that cross-country skiing is an excellent way to find solitude and practice preaching. The forest is an excellent listener. The trees never contradict you. Two years ago, I was skiing near Cheboygan, practicing for Sunday morning. I was in rare form. I was bold, loud, challenging, creative, funny...and completely by myself. Or so I thought. I was in the midst of a particularly moving speech, when not one skier, but a whole family crested the hill in front of me. I have no idea how long they had heard me shouting, or what they thought I was doing. I just clammed up, nodded, and hurried off in the other direction. It took a while to get my groove back.

Nevertheless, there is something about taking a walk that can really help you clear your mind, especially when you are stressed or grieving. You can talk things over, either to yourself, or with someone else. You can consider your options, listen to your heart, or simply take some time to practice silence, which is nearly a lost art in our society.

A few years ago I went on a spiritual retreat called the "Walk to Emmaus." The Emmaus Walk is a three-day retreat that is intended to bring you closer to Jesus, and the whole weekend is based on the scripture we read today. On the very first evening, after dinner, they ask you to remain in complete silence until breakfast the next morning. Even in the bathroom, brushing your teeth, waiting in line for a toilet, you don't speak a word to anyone. At first, it was really weird. But afterwards, while reflecting on that time, we realized what a gift we had been given. It was a relief to talk to others again, because all those silent moments

were pent up inside us like a dam ready to burst. We could communicate even more clearly what was going on in our lives.

Sometimes we get overwhelmed by the noise. Sometimes we are so lost within ourselves and our own thinking, we don't even see what's going on around us. Did you ever miss something really important because you were distracted by your own inner thoughts? I sure have! Side note: Ladies, can I let you in on a little secret? If you want a guy to do something for you, ask him more than once. Seriously. Asking him only once is like never having asked him at all!

We all get wrapped up in our own thoughts, men and women, children and adults. We get lost, and we feel the need to step away and rest, get some space. That's what was happening with these two men on the road to Emmaus. They were lost in their own thoughts, and as we will see, they were certainly not expecting Jesus to show up, let alone have a life-changing, heart-burning encounter with him. And I believe there is a lot we can learn from their story.

These men were disciples of Jesus, but not part of the original twelve apostles. They were not having a good day, and they definitely needed to get outside, get away. Now, Emmaus was a village about 7 miles from Jerusalem, about a two-hour leisurely walk. Maybe these men were on their way back home to Galilee. Maybe they wanted to get out of Jerusalem and speak more freely, without fearing if the Jews would overhear them. Whatever the case, they were on the open road, talking back and forth about what they had seen and heard.

This passage indicates that they knew Jesus and his ministry, and they had hoped he would redeem or save Israel. They knew Jesus had died on the cross, and they had been around Jerusalem long enough to hear the women come back from the empty tomb, claiming to have seen angels. This first bit of hope, this

tiny bit of information, must have seemed so crazy, so amazingly and unbelievable, that they had to leave. They had had enough, and they needed to go for a walk.

In the midst of their wonderings, maybe even arguments, Jesus showed up. Luke says that they were kept from recognizing Jesus, even though Jesus obviously knew who they were. I think these men were so sad and downcast, they couldn't recognize Jesus. They were completely lost in their thoughts. They had lost hope.

Jesus got their attention with a question. "What are you talking about?" The disciples were almost bitingly sarcastic. "Are you a stranger? Don't you know?"

Jesus maintained his ignorance. "What things?" See, he knew, you have to ask the question twice! Jesus was being a good counselor. He wanted them to talk. He wanted them to speak aloud the worries on their hearts. Jesus doesn't want us to pretend. He doesn't want us to hide how we feel. Jesus loves our honesty. So he got them to say what they are thinking. Jesus listened first, then spoke.

These men opened up their hearts. They were sad. They were confused. They were disappointed. It was the third day, the day when they possibly could have expected to see Jesus again, but they didn't. Even though they had heard the women's report, they didn't believe it. They were stuck.

What was missing in their lives? It was the third day, the women had reported the tomb was empty. They knew what Jesus had taught them. Why weren't they expecting the resurrection? Here's what I think. They were missing Jesus himself. In that regard, it's no wonder Jesus calls them foolish. The biblical

idea of foolishness is rejecting the wisdom of God. These men were just slow to believe. It seems that they were actually more fixated on the fact that Jesus had died than they were about the stories bubbling up. Their own expectations were not met. That's why they were sad. It wasn't the resurrection stories that brought them down, but the crucifixion in the first place. They just couldn't believe that Jesus had died. They needed to get over the crucifixion before they could accept the resurrection. They needed help. And Jesus gave it to them.

I wonder sometimes if we get so wrapped up in the crucifixion that we forget the resurrection. Take religious art, for example. Have you ever been to Indian River's Cross in the Woods Shrine? It is amazing. It's huge. *(Picture.)* Similarly, my grandparents' Lutheran Church in Romeo, Michigan, has a gorgeous crucifix in the center of their altar. But take a look at our cross here. It is empty. Did you ever notice that? In most Methodist churches, most Protestant churches, it's an empty cross, not a crucifix. Why? Our emphasis is that when Jesus said, "It is finished," he meant it. (John 19:30) Done. We don't put Jesus back on the cross again. Even when we sin. Even when we are depressed, rebellious. When we ignore God. When we act out of ignorance. Jesus isn't crucified over and over and over again. It is finished.

The Emmaus disciples couldn't let go of the crucifixion. To them, it was their end, not their beginning. But that's not who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are a people of the resurrection. We are a people who worship Jesus who is ALIVE. The Risen Savior.

Jesus spoke to the hearts of these two disciples. The scripture says their hearts burned. Passion was aroused. Tears. Hope. Maybe even some laughter. That "aha" moment. That's why Christ suffered! For us! Of course. Maybe, they

were even to the point where they realized that they would see him again, and soon. They had no idea how soon.

They got to Emmaus, and Jesus pretended like he was going on to the next town. This part, truly, I find amusing. This has to show Jesus' sense of humor. Really, was he just going to say, "Well, nice talking to you two. I'm going on ahead to the next hotel"? But the men, in the true spirit of hospitality, invited him in for a meal. They said, "It's getting late. Stay with us." It's dark, it's dangerous to be on the road alone. And they came in for a meal, and then it happened. My favorite part of this whole story. Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, and passed it around the table. I can just picture the faces of the men. "Wait, where have I seen this before?" Boom! They got it. It was Jesus! He was alive! And then...he disappeared from their sight. Can you imagine how these men felt? Seriously, now I think Jesus was teasing them, just a little.

But this encounter changed these men dramatically. No longer depressed, no longer disappointed, they looked at each other and uttered those famous words, "Weren't our hearts burning as he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?" Emboldened by their encounter with Christ, they got back on the very same road they warned Jesus NOT to travel, and ran back to Jerusalem. They had to tell someone what they just experienced. In Jerusalem, they found the disciples and shared their joy with them.

Shouldn't an encounter with Jesus change us the same way? When we engage Christ, our hearts should burn. Our attitudes should change. Our responses to this world should be different. Before meeting Christ, these men were afraid. Darkness was coming. It was dangerous to be out on the road. But after they saw and recognized Christ, even though he disappeared from their

eyes, they were empowered, encouraged, they ran seven miles back to Jerusalem, the very place of fear and regret, and they changed the story for everyone. They brought encouragement, and they received encouragement.

What is the point of following Jesus? Why do we need to read these stories? Two words: Life transformation. Do we truly believe this incredible story, the gospel? God loves us, formed us for a relationship, and redeemed us from all of our brokenness and sin by sending his own Son to die for us. Then was resurrected, and he showed us eternal life....That's the gospel. If we believe all that, something about us should be different. Very different. Heart burning-ly different.

In my own life, I can point to specific choices that I have made, because I want to follow Christ, because my heart burns for him. I look at times in my life when I have had to forgive myself, when I have had to forgive others, and when I have had to ask for forgiveness, because my heart burns with the love of God. I want my walk to encourage others. Am I going to mess up? Yes. Again and again. But the hope of the resurrection has changed me, and the power of the Holy Spirit is going to keep working in my life, as long as I continue to say yes to Jesus.

Where does that leave us? First of all, I think we have to embrace the crucifixion, but not be morbid about it. We need to realize the depth of this sacrifice, that Jesus the Son of God, died for us. A vicious, humiliating, painful death. God died. For us. Our sin put him on the cross. We have to embrace that fact.

And then, ironically, we have to let go. We can't stay at the crucifixion forever. That's why these men were lost. They couldn't get over their grief, their

disappointment. They were stuck at the cross. It took a powerful moment with Jesus himself to get them back on the right path. It was a serious heart burn, and it was caused by the Son of God himself, and it felt better than anything they had ever experienced before.

Encountering Christ on the road changed these two men. We can expect the same change in our lives when we seek Jesus and find him. These men were able to talk about the deepest, darkest moments of their lives with Jesus. Jesus wants to do the same for us. We recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread. His presence is once again among us. We don't cling to the old rugged cross – yes, I know the song says we do – but truly, we cling to the hope the empty cross represents. The tomb is still empty. We don't grieve Jesus' death any more. We have victory instead.

So, where are you in your walk with Christ? Can you see him? Or are you blinded by something, like grief or shame? Are you even looking to see him? Endeavor to open our eyes. Realize that Jesus is there with you. He is walking with us. We need to seek others who will talk about these things with us.

It's time to get outside and go for a walk.

Memory verse

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” – Luke 24:32 (NIV)

Reflection questions

1. Describe a time when you were so wrapped up in your own thoughts that you missed something significant.

2. Luke 24:16 says the two disciples were “kept from recognizing” Jesus. Why do you think this happened? Does God hide from people?
3. If you could have a face-to-face conversation with Jesus, what would you ask him?
4. Describe a time in your life when your heart “burned within you.”
5. How can you “open your eyes and recognize Christ” in your life?
6. How can you help someone else encounter Christ?