

Acts 2: 36-41
Luke 24: 13-23
April 30, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

As I reflected on the passage from the Gospel of Luke I had an insight. I don't know whether it is a *good* insight or a helpful one. So consider this message to be the opportunity to overhear me ruminating to myself. Let me know if there is anything useful in what I say.

The insight is this: *death* is very different on the resurrection side of Jesus' crucifixion than it is on the suffering and dying side. *It is the same death*. Yet how it is presented and experienced in the in the days leading up to and including Good Friday is very different from the death presented and experienced in Jesus risen from the dead.

In the chapters leading up to Jesus' arrest and death on the cross death casts a powerful and fearful shadow over the events following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. As the week progresses the day grows darker, the shadows lengthen. Jesus becomes more sober. His disciples become more on edge. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus literally sweats blood and pleads with God to be released from the obligation to go to the cross. The disciples weighed down by despair, sleep and later scatter.

This is death as the great ruler over life, the power which rules by fear. This is death who rules through dread of the future in such a powerful way that we are afraid to truly live because something bad might happen. The apostle Paul accurately terms this experience, "the sting of death." We seek to protect ourselves and those we love from death while all the while knowing that there is nothing we can do about it. Death is terrible and inevitable.

Now hear this story from the resurrection side of death. Two disciples are walking to a town called Emmaus. They are completely self-absorbed. They are rehearsing the terrible events which conspired to kill their teacher and spiritual leader. So deeply involved in their conversation they fail to recognize that someone has joined them.

This “stranger” asks, “What are you discussing with each other as you walk along the road?” This sounds a little stilted to me. I imagine what he really said was more like, “Hey guys, what are you talking about?”

A child observing this scene would have no difficulty seeing the humor in this. Here are these two followers of Jesus who just a week earlier would have picked him out of a crowd with to trouble; Jesus walks up to them and speaks to them and they are clueless! There is something playful about the way Jesus walks up to them and impudently interjects himself into their conversation. There is something funny about the seriousness of the disciples with their focus on Jesus’ death and the fact that Jesus is right there asking what is an incredibly naïve question!

The humorous nature of the episode is heightened by the almost self-righteous response of Cleopas who angrily demands (of Jesus) “Are you the only *stranger* in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened these days?”

The stranger Jesus innocently asks, “What things?”

Let’s just pause and let the ridiculousness of this situation settle in. Jesus is right there. He is asking them these dumb questions. They are so full of their own sadness that they are lecturing Jesus on what in fact *happened to him!* One can picture Jesus patiently waiting for these two followers to wake up and recognize him. But the crazy thing is this—*they don’t!* Even

when Jesus gently chides them for their failure to recognize him; even when he takes them on the ultimate Bible study which paints a direct line from the prophets to the cross and the resurrection—*they don't recognize him*. In fact it never occurs to them that this stranger knows more about what happened than they do.

Jesus must have been gratified that, despite their being so oblivious, they have the right idea. They invite him to stay and eat. Hospitality to strangers, from the very beginning of the biblical story, has been the main way people encounter God.

And in the midst of this act of hospitality, Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, and their eyes open and they recognize him. And here is the best part of this comedy. In offering hospitality to this stranger, they lose control of the story. The stranger breaks the bread and offers the blessing. It is the stranger who becomes the host. *And then their eyes open and they recognize that all along they have been walking with Jesus!*

Then Jesus vanishes from their sight. The ultimate punch line! How are they going to explain this to the folks back in Jerusalem!

What a difference between the dark foreboding of Holy Week and the almost whimsical meeting between two followers and their supposedly dead teacher! Just a week earlier death meant the end of life, the end of all hopes and dreams—that dark valley where all roads meet...and come to an end.

Yet here the road clearly continues *through the valley*. It does not end. And the awakening to the continuation of the path of life *through death* is not accomplished by polished sermons and well-honed creeds and theological statements. It happens through a playfully subversive encounter between a living dead man and two dead living men. What happened

there utterly destroyed the firm grip of the belief in the ultimate power of death. What happened there dethroned the emperor of the living as the ultimate power over life. Death is still death. But it is no longer a cruel tyrant threatening us and paralyzing us with fear and dread. If possible, death as transformed by God in Jesus has a friendlier role.

For instance, because I am not afraid of dying I can really appreciate the beautiful gift of life. Because I am not afraid of losing life or the lives of people I love I can rejoice in the preciousness of their lives without the need to control their paths. Because I am not afraid of dying I can have a sense of humor about all the things that, in my fear, I hold onto so desperately. I can understand what Jesus means when he says, "The one who seeks to save his/her life will lose it."

And finally, because death is a companion to me pointing out all that is precious and wonderful and mysterious and lovely, I can walk with all who are sad, hopeless, lost, beaten down as a gentle sign that, as the living dead man Jesus walks with me, he walks with them. He walks with all of us. Amen.