

## LIVING WITH THE RISEN JESUS

A Sermon by Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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Today I'd like to speak about the risen Christ and his role in the lives of those of us who are Christians today. For without the risen Christ there would be no Christianity. As I said two weeks ago in my Eastern sermon, the apostles must have been very discouraged after their leader's death. It must have taken a lot for them to believe that Jesus was alive again among them, and clearly they didn't buy Mary Magdalene's first report that she'd seen Jesus outside of his tomb. Just two verses before the one that begins this morning's gospel lesson,<sup>i</sup> we are told that for the eleven remaining male apostles Mary's "words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."<sup>ii</sup> After Jesus' agonizing death, nailed to a cross, the apostles were depressed and disillusioned. Only one of them was reported, in only one gospel, to have been at the cross when he died.<sup>iii</sup> Now their radical Jewish sect was dead, dead, dead. But then they had the utterly shocking and surprising experience of Jesus reappearing to them, and a movement was launched which later became the largest religion in world history.<sup>iv</sup>

As I've explained many times from this pulpit,<sup>v</sup> I don't believe the biblical evidence of the resurrection is of a resuscitated human body. Instead Jesus appears to his disciples as a spiritual presence, probably in forms we would now call visions. This was not just a matter of hallucination, however; it was experiential reality. The mystical-type experiences of the risen

Christ for his followers were intense and transformational. Let's look, for example at the phenomenon described in today's gospel lesson from Luke.<sup>vi</sup>

Two of Jesus' disciples are walking on a road near Jerusalem talking about all that had happened to their master, Jesus, who'd arrived triumphally in Jerusalem from the Galilee region just a week before. In the midst of this discussion another man joins them on the road and asks what they're talking about. The text tells us that it's Jesus himself, but somehow his own disciples, who know him intimately, are not able to recognize him. They tell the stranger the story of Jesus, "a prophet mighty in deed and word," and they explain how women of their group found Jesus's tomb empty that very morning and then saw "a vision of angels who said that he was alive." Note that the word "vision" is used by the disciples for the appearance of the angels. So, these disciples know that Jesus is now alive, they are talking to the stranger, who is Jesus, about Jesus, and somehow they don't recognize him? The stranger then talks to them at length about Jesus in relation to prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures. And they still don't equate the stranger with Jesus. It's only near evening, after they've arrived in the village of Emmaus, about 7 miles from Jerusalem, and after they've invited the stranger to stay with them for supper, that they suddenly recognize him as Jesus. And that happens at the very moment at the table when "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them."<sup>vii</sup> No sooner do they recognize him, though, than he suddenly vanishes from their sight. This doesn't sound like a normal human being at all, but some kind of spiritual presence. In the gospel of John the risen Christ is said to appear to the disciples twice by passing through shut<sup>viii</sup> and locked<sup>ix</sup> doors, again not something possible for a normal physical body.

So what's really going on in this story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus? Eminent New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan says simply that Emmaus never

happened. Luke's story, written at least fifty years after Jesus' death,<sup>x</sup> is a metaphorical condensation of the early years of Christian thought and practice, centering on the experience of eating together as a committed religious community which remembers Jesus each time bread is broken and blessed in his name.<sup>xi</sup> Of course, it makes sense, then, that Jesus might seem to vanish once the moment of prayerful remembrance has passed. But he can and should be remembered again and again, especially in the sacrament of bread and wine called Holy Communion, which the Christian Church has come to celebrate on a regular basis, as we will later in this service today. In that sense Emmaus keeps happening, or as Crossan puts it, "Emmaus always happens."<sup>xii</sup>

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg calls the Emmaus story a parable of resurrection. It didn't happen as an event that could have been videotaped. Instead, "The risen Jesus is known in the sharing of bread." And, as symbolized earlier in the story, "The risen Jesus journeys with his followers, even when they don't know it."<sup>xiii</sup> This is part of the biblical story that I really love -- the two disciples later trying to convince themselves that they really knew Jesus was journeying with them all along: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"<sup>xiv</sup> Classic revisionist history, but touching nonetheless.

How often do we everyday Christians do that as well -- engage in revisionist history in looking back on important spiritual moments in our lives, convincing ourselves that Jesus or the Holy Spirit must have been there at our sides, even though we had no idea at the time? In a less cynical or sarcastic sense, this is what the spiritual life is all about anyway: Trying to make more and more of our lives a prayer. Trying to dedicate more and more of our lives to the highest and best of which we're capable. Trying to celebrate the incredible gift of life that

is with us every moment, if only we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. And also recognizing how much of our own life is outside of our conscious control, and therefore how grateful we should be for those moments of undeserved and unrecognized companionship when we are in need, those moments of amazing grace, when we're lifted up and buoyed up by a power of love that's not of our own making.

Love, of course, is the centerpiece of the Christian life. When Jesus is asked during his earthly ministry which commandment is the greatest of all, he replies “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>xv</sup> Perhaps even more powerful is the love demonstrated by the risen Christ. For what could be worse, less forgiveable, and less worthy of love than having one of your disciples betray you to be horribly tortured and excruciatingly executed,<sup>xvi</sup> another disciple deny you three times to save his own skin,<sup>xvii</sup> and the rest of your disciples turn tail and run,<sup>xviii</sup> with most nowhere to be seen as you are publicly crucified. The resurrected Jesus comes back into the lives of these very unlovable disciples. They hear him say things like “Peace be with you,”<sup>xix</sup> and “Remember, I am with you always.”<sup>xx</sup> Peter, who had denied him three times, is given the commission to go forth and “Feed my lambs,” “Tend my sheep,” “Feed my sheep.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Others in the Bible who never even met Jesus during his earthly ministry, experience the love of the risen Christ. A prime example is the great apostle Paul who spends two years ravaging the early church,<sup>xxii</sup> dragging both men and women off to prison,<sup>xxiii</sup> “breathing threats and murder” against Jesus’ disciples.<sup>xxiv</sup> Then, one day on the road to Damascus, Paul, then called Saul, has a vision of a blinding light. He falls to the ground and then hears a

voice calling to him, saying “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asks whose voice this is, and the answer comes back, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”<sup>xxv</sup> Paul then becomes the great evangelist for Christianity, traveling from Israel across Asia Minor to Greece and Rome, sending letters to start-up churches that become the earliest writings of the New Testament. Some of those epistles speak of experiencing the love of the risen Christ in absolutely gorgeous poetry: “Love is patient; love is kind ... it is not irritable or resentful ... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Or, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life... nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

The risen Christ at the very end commissions his disciples somewhat differently in each gospel: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”<sup>xxviii</sup> “Make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”<sup>xxix</sup> “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [my]... name to all nations.”<sup>xxx</sup> “Feed my sheep... feed my lambs.”<sup>xxxi</sup> But the central point of the good news, of the commandments, of forgiveness, of feeding is love. The last major lesson that Jesus teaches his disciples in the gospel of Matthew before his betrayal and crucifixion is to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and welcome the stranger. “Just as you did it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Jesus defied all the conventions of his day to break bread with hated tax collectors, prostitutes, and Roman soldiers, with people of all social classes, ethnicities and genders. Jesus’ message was one of radical equality and an open table

for all. The risen Christ reaffirms the earthly Jesus' lifetime teachings and sends his disciples out to spread that good news throughout the world.

But most of the time you and I are on the road to Emmaus – heading away from Jerusalem, confused, downcast and discouraged, slow of heart. We don't recognize that we are living with the risen Jesus. We can begin to proclaim the good news of love, though, simply by having an open table in our lives, as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus had for the stranger they met. We can experience the risen Jesus liturgically as well, if only for a fleeting moment, as we gather as a community around the table here in church for Holy Communion, eating and drinking in remembrance of him.

Today's Prayer of the Day, says it all. Look back to the bottom of the first page of your order of service with me. You didn't actually have to listen to this sermon. We could have stopped there. "Let us pray: Elusive God, companion on the way, you walk behind, beside, beyond; you catch us unaware. Break through the disillusionment and despair clouding our vision, that, with wide-eyed wonder, we may find our way and journey on as messengers of your good news. Amen."

## BENEDICTION

Risen Jesus, dwell in each of us.

Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth.

Lead us from despair to hope, from fear to trust.

Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace.

Let peace fill our hearts, our world, our universe. Amen.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 24: 13-35.

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 24: 11.

<sup>iii</sup> John 19: 25-27; Compare Mark 15:40-41; Matthew 27:55-56; Luke 23:49.

<sup>iv</sup> Scotty McLennan, "Sound the Tambourines!" An Easter sermon delivered in the Stanford Memorial Church on March 23, 2008.

<sup>v</sup> Scotty McLennan, Easter sermons delivered in the Stanford Memorial Church as follows: "The Risen, Vanishing Lord" (4/14/01); "He Has Been Raised" (4/20/03); "The Post-Easter Jesus" (4/16/06); "Astonishing Hope" (April 8, 2007); "The Risen Christ" (April 6, 2008); "Resurrection Day" (April 8, 2012); "From Rejection to Cornerstone" (March 31, 2013).

<sup>vi</sup> Luke 24: 13-35.

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 24: 30.

<sup>viii</sup> John 20: 26.

<sup>ix</sup> John 20: 19.

<sup>x</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. x; Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 1760.

<sup>xi</sup> Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 197.

<sup>xii</sup> Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 197.

<sup>xiii</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 286.

<sup>xiv</sup> John 24:32.

<sup>xv</sup> Matthew 22: 37-40; See also Mark 12: 29-31 and Luke 10: 27.

<sup>xvi</sup> See story of Judas' betrayal in Matthew 26: 47-50; Mark 14: 43-45; Luke 22: 47-8; John 18: 1-5.

<sup>xvii</sup> See story of Peter's denial in Matthew 26: 69-75; Mark 14: 66-72; Luke 22: 54-62; John 18: 15-18, 25-27.

<sup>xviii</sup> Matthew 26: 56; Mark 14: 50.

<sup>xix</sup> Luke 24: 36; John 20: 19, 26.

<sup>xx</sup> Matthew 28: 20.

<sup>xxi</sup> John 21: 15-17.

<sup>xxii</sup> Peter Calvocoressi, *Who's Who in the Bible* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 141.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Acts 8: 3.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Acts 9: 1.

<sup>xxv</sup> See Acts 9:1-22; 22:6-16; 26:12-18.

<sup>xxvi</sup> I Corinthians 13: 4-8.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Romans 8: 35, 38-39.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Mark 16: 15.

<sup>xxix</sup> Matthew 28: 19-20.

<sup>xxx</sup> Luke 24:47.

<sup>xxxi</sup> John 21:15-17.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Matthew 25: 40.