



## Easter 3 (A)

### Breaking

[RCL]: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

We find ourselves in the middle of this Easter season, now on the third Sunday after the Resurrection, and we have a beautiful narrative of how new life breaks into the midst of shattered hopes. Today, we are transported back to Easter evening – “that same day” when Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, and the other women discover the empty tomb and Peter confirms their news. “That same day,” we meet two of Jesus’ disciples on the road from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. The two—one is named Cleopas, we’re told—are discussing all that has happened: how Jesus had taught and healed; how that same Jesus was betrayed, flogged, and made a spectacle of shame; and how that same Jesus had breathed his last and was laid in a sealed tomb.

Add to all this the report that Jesus’ body was apparently now missing and listen to the confusion swirl and the questions fly. How could this have happened? Had he been taken? What are we to do now? Where do we go from here? The two disciples have a while—seven miles—to roll these details over, to ruminate on this loss and wonder at these strange occurrences, as they trudge on to Emmaus. “Really’s?” and “what if’s” animate their footsteps amidst exhaustion and abandonment.

“But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” It’s a statement saturated with honesty and pain—a confession of sorts. This was the One who was to restore Israel, to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. This was the One for whom generations had longed, hope built upon hope for centuries. And this One finally had a face. Now, even after his death, that face was gone, vanished from view. Imagine the weight of grief. Imagine the intensity of loss. Imagine all that compounded by utter confusion.

It might not be all that hard to imagine, honestly. The Emmaus road is one likely familiar to many of us, this side of heaven. It’s a well-worn path, dotted with defeat and disappointment, marked by sinking diagnosis, inevitable questions, and disbelief. Life seasons and circumstances often determine how steep or winding or rocky this road is, but many of us have probably trod it, whether in the past or in the present.

The beauty we experience week in and week out in the scriptures is that the living God meets us on this road. The living God comes alongside us unexpectedly in moments of loss and difficulty. The living God walks with us in times that tempt despair and despondency, whether we realize it or not. And this is

precisely what Cleopas and his friend experience on the Emmaus road, as they encounter a stranger mid-step.

“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” he asks. He must have been hiding under a rock, they think. Otherwise, why on earth would he ask about the strange things which had transpired? Little do the disciples know that this is the One whom they have been mourning. Maybe it’s grief obscuring their vision. Maybe hypotheticals have dulled their senses. Or maybe the disciples are too entangled in the weeds of dashed hopes. Whatever it is, they fail to recognize the One in their midst.

But Jesus is there still and hears them out. Jesus listens to their stories of disappointment, at the core of which is his absence. He hears of how he was handed over, condemned, crucified, and buried along with the hopes of Israel. He hears of how his body is missing. Jesus walks stride-in-stride with his dejected followers, listening intently. Even if the news isn’t breaking, the disciples’ hearts and dreams are, spilled out before this stranger.

The women, the disciples tell this stranger, went to the tomb, but they did not find him. The irony is surely not lost: though Jesus is in front of their eyes, the disciples fail to see him. “Have you not heard the prophets? Have their words not sunk in?” Jesus asks. Remember Moses and your forebears in the faith. Remember the prophets. Remember the scriptures, dripping with promise.

The disciples’ hearts begin to burn, as they wonder after the identity of this stranger. But there is still some distance, some doubt, that clouds their vision and obscures their eventual recognition of who is walking and talking with them. If we read around in the gospels, though, this is pretty typical of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. It takes time or some sort of personal revelation for this otherworldly visitation to register. Remember that well-known story of Mary Magdalene confusing the risen Christ for a gardener. Remember too that startling scene—immediately after the Emmaus Road episode—when we read that it takes some time for the disciples’ eyes to recognize what appears like a ghost as the risen Christ himself.

In that startling scene, food plays a critical role. Jesus eats baked (or broiled) fish, something no ghost can claim. Such sustenance strengthens the muscles of the risen Messiah. Today too, Jesus is known in the blessing, breaking, and giving of bread, again showing that the savior resurrects humanity carbohydrate by carbohydrate, from the most basic stuff of life.

It seems near impossible for those disciples not to have connected this supper with the last supper, when Jesus said he would not eat with them again until the Passover had been fulfilled. There seems to be too strong a connection with the two meals not to see a common bread, a common host. In this simple action of blessing, breaking, and giving of bread, we’re told, something dramatic happens. As Jesus tears apart that simple loaf, crumbs of disbelief and hopelessness fall to the ground. The disciples’ eyes, once clouded with tears, become open to the realities of the resurrection and the provisional character of death.

If the Emmaus Road narrative teaches us anything, it is that God has a preferential option for brokenness, which we see repeatedly in the life, death, and ministry of Jesus. As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, Jesus seems to gravitate toward those whose lives are split open, either by sickness or loss or disappointment. It is in the cracks of our humanity that divine, resurrected life shines brightest.

With the sun setting on their hopes for Israel's redemption, Cleopas and his companion are forced to acknowledge their lives broken open; their dreams scattered on that dusty highway. But it is precisely in that moment that Jesus comes alongside them, opens up the scriptures again, and reminds them afresh of the very foundations of their hope. The disciples hear the great narrative of God's history-altering love from the lips of love himself.

And when all the scriptures have been unpacked and interpreted, when all the loose ends have been tied up, a meal reinforces the point: the Lord is risen indeed. *Amen.*

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