



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Sidnie White Crawford
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter
St. Mark's on the Campus
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AS I WAS READING this morning's gospel in preparation for writing this sermon, I was struck by how much this one gospel passage mirrors and illuminates what we Episcopalians do on Sunday mornings. Notice that I said, "illuminate," because what we do on Sunday morning, our liturgy, might not be all that transparent to us, let alone a casual visitor. Even though the Episcopal Church is officially Protestant, that is, not part of the Roman Catholic church (Henry VIII took care of that), what we do is very different from what most people expect in a Protestant worship service, and can take some getting used to. So why do we do what we do? What is the reason for this liturgy, what does it symbolize, what does it mean? For some answers, let's dig into today's gospel.

The passage opens with the phrase, "On the first day of the week," that is, Sunday. Although the very earliest followers of Jesus observed the Jewish Sabbath, the seventh day, Saturday, very early on there began a practice to gather among the followers of the Way to gather to observe the day of the resurrection as well, i.e. Sunday. As Judaism and Christianity split apart, one thing that began to separate or differentiate Jews and Christians was the keeping of different holy days. For Christians, Sunday became the holy day, the day of corporate worship. And although nowadays we tend to think of Monday as the start of the week because of our work schedules, if we remember that Sunday is the real first day of the week, we realize that we start our week by worshipping God. And that's a better start to the week than stopping at Starbucks for a latte on the way to the office!

The very next phrase in the gospel is important, too: "two of Jesus' followers." Not a single person, but two together. The Episcopal Church emphasizes corporate worship, the gathering of the church for common prayer. That's the name of our book, after all. Individual devotions, of course, are encouraged; that's the point of the Daily Office. But to have Eucharist, the central sacrament of the church, you have to have at least two people (one of them must be a priest). This insistence on the Eucharistic liturgy as corporate, the offering of the church as represented by one priest and one lay person, makes us different from the Roman Catholic Church, in which a priest can say Mass alone.

The next event in the gospel lesson is Jesus' joining his two followers. It's fascinating, isn't it, that they don't recognize him? That's a motif that recurs constantly in the resurrection stories- Jesus is assuredly Jesus, and his body is physical, but there is something different about him; people don't automatically recognize him, and he can appear and disappear at will, as he does later in this passage. However, that's a subject for another sermon.

In any case, what happens? The followers express disappointment and confusion about what happened in the last few days, and Jesus helps them to understand who he is by expounding the Scriptures to them. And isn't that what we do on Sunday mornings? First we gather, and then we read the lessons and have the sermon, which, in the best-case scenario, is supposed to explain the Scriptures. Jesus, in that historical time and place, has available to him what we call the Old Testament. We now also have the New Testament, and every week we actually have four different Scripture passages to chew on: an Old Testament passage (although in Easter season, Acts is often substituted, as it was today), a Psalm, a non-gospel New Testament passage, and a gospel reading. The sermon then interprets that Scripture, explaining it, applying it, and sometimes even criticizing it. That act of interpretation is very important, and we use the example of Jesus to justify it. Just as Jesus had to interpret the Scriptures for his followers, so we need to interpret them today. As I often say, both from this pulpit and in my classroom, we are separated from Scripture by language, by time, by geography, and by culture. So it not surprising that we must engage in the act of interpretation. Now, those followers in Luke were lucky; they had Jesus. We do not have that direct privilege. That's why the Episcopal Church insists on an *educated* clergy; the church wants me, or Jerry, Gretchen, Ryan, and Christine, to have the best tools available to do the best job we can. And we pray that God will bless our words, so that, maybe, our hearers' hearts will "burn within them," as happened to Cleopas and his friend in Luke.

Now, many Protestant churches stop right there, with what we call the Liturgy of the Word. Historically, this was a reaction against the Roman Catholic insistence on the priest as set apart because of the laying on of hands, and therefore of a different "order" than the laity. This led to all kinds of abuses, as any one who has studied the causes of the Reformation knows. However, often the pendulum swung too far in the other direction, leading to an overemphasis on the clergyperson as preacher, and a kind of passivity in the congregation, who are put in the role of audience. This seems to me dangerous, since it can lead to a cult of personality in a church; the fortunes of the church rise and fall with the pastor. There is less of a danger of that in our denomination (although it can certainly happen), since our emphasis is on the Eucharist, which needs both priest and people.

Why do we emphasize the Eucharist? Well, let's keep going in our gospel passage. After Jesus expounds the Scripture to his followers, they urge him to spend the night with them. They sit down for a meal; Jesus takes bread, a staple of any Middle Eastern meal then or now, and says the traditional Jewish blessing over bread: *Barukh 'attah Adonai, melek ha-'olam, ha-motzi lehem min ha-aretz* ("Blessed are you, O Lord, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth"). He breaks the bread, gives it to them, and it is *then* that they finally recognize him. There it is, in a nutshell. Jesus is known to his followers fully and completely in the breaking and sharing of bread. Not in prayer, hymn singing, or Bible study, but in the breaking and sharing of bread. That's why we keep going after the sermon. The sermon, lacking Jesus to actually preach it, is a human endeavor, and, like all human endeavors, it can misfire. But the Eucharist, we believe, is something in which Jesus is present, and does for us, and with us, and among us.

How does that work? Here we touch on a matter about which reams and reams and reams of pages have been written. Is it transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or symbolic? Why is it necessary to have a priest? What if the priest is a "notorious sinner"? Do you have a few hours to spare so that we can discuss it?

The bottom line is that this is one of those mysteries of faith. We believe that in this ritual, which we are about to celebrate, Christ's presence among us, the body of the faithful, becomes somehow palpable and real, and we are better able to sense it, to commune with Christ. The special role of the priest as

consecrator comes in through the concept of “apostolic succession,” the idea that he or she is the most recent in a long line of priests, each laying hands on each, which stretches back to the earliest church. Thus the priest is set apart for this particular ministry. That’s why, when Ryan is ordained on May 1, not only the bishop but Jerry, Gretchen, me, and any other priests present will lay hands on Ryan. So the priest “stands in,” as it were, for Jesus as we break the bread, and all of us join in the generations of the church who have experienced Christ’s presence in the bread and the wine. As Luke says at the end of the gospel passage, “he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

This gospel passage, which reflects so well our present day liturgy, shines a light on how the earliest Christians worshipped. We know from the *Apology* of Justin Martyr, written in 155 CE, what Christians were doing in the second century. He writes,

And on the day named after the sun, all who live in city or countryside assemble, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writing of the prophets are read for as long as time allows. When the lector has finished, the president addresses us, admonishing us and exhorting us to imitate the splendid things we have heard. Then we all stand and pray, and...bread, wine, and water are brought up. The president offers prayers of thanksgiving...the gifts over which thanksgiving has been spoken are distributed, and each one shares in them, while they are also sent via the deacons to the absent brethren...¹

This should sound very familiar to us. We are part of an ancient tradition that puts us in fellowship with Christians past, present, and future. I really like that about our liturgy.

So here is what we do, and why we do it, according to the gospel of Luke: we gather, we hear and expound the word, we break the bread and eat with the presence of Christ, and we go back into the world and witness. We do it because that’s what our resurrected Lord did with his disciples. My prayer is that we, like Cleopas and his friend, may find our hearts burning within us, and that we recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

¹ As quoted in Jeffrey Lee, *Opening the Prayer Book* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999) 28-29.