

ABIDE WITH US
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This two Sundays away from Christmas, it may seem unusual that we should take a text speaking to us of the resurrection of our Lord. Yet Christmas is not significant except for the fact that there is a resurrection. The gospel of Luke began by telling us that the child grew up. No child is significant until the child has had a chance to establish an identity. It is life that makes the birth significant.

For nearly two thousand years after the event there was only one Bethlehem baby, only one Nazareth child whose birthday we remember. What makes him unique?

What makes him unique are the promises of Christmas told to us in the early part of the gospel of Luke. The promise of Christmas made by the angel Gabriel to Mary. This child who comes would be identified by the word "Jesus." Meaning "one who saves." He would be Son of the most high God. He would occupy the throne of David and have an everlasting kingdom. He would be holy. Elizabeth, while expectant with her own child, when she sees Mary identifies the child within Mary as "my Lord." The elderly priest Zechariah in breaking out a song about the birth of his son who became John the Baptist identifies the Christmas baby as one who would redeem his people, as one who would become the horn of salvation, even as an animal's power is symbolized and concentrated in his horn so the salvation of God is concentrated, Zechariah sees, in the Christmas child. For Zechariah this one coming is the Lord. He is the dawning day. He is the guide to peace.

The shepherds saw the promise of Christmas as the manger baby was Savior. The Messiah. And the Lord. This had been told to them by the angels. Simeon, an elderly man who worshipped the Lord, in the temple had begun his search for the Messiah by looking for the one who would redeem his people Israel but once he had seen the child Jesus his vision enlarged to include the savior as one who would redeem Israel but once he had the baby in his arms he saw that this child was for the salvation of all mankind. And Anna, the elderly lady in the temple spoke of Jesus as the one who would bring redemption to Jerusalem.

These are the promises of Christmas. The gospel of Luke, which we have followed over these last months, has attempted to show us how these promises have come to pass. Luke began with the story of the advent, closes now with the full circle of sharing with us the good news of the Christmas promises.

In this story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus which is alone recorded in the gospel of Luke and is the lengthiest account of the resurrection appearance that we have in all of the gospels we find what is true if the promises of Christmas are empty. We find also what is true if the promises of Christmas are indeed reality.

As these two disciples walk on the road to Emmaus we initially encounter them as believing that the promises of Christmas were indeed not true. The reaction they have which can be easily noted from the text. What happens if the angel's message is an empty message? The child did not become what his announcement was intended to be.

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The first result we see in the gospel text is certainly this – sadness. “They stood still looking sad.” And they further say “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” Notice the verb: we had hoped. Past tense. They no longer expect the hope to have a reality. Jesus has been crucified. As we encounter these two disciples on the road to Emmaus we identify with them. We see how much their love for Jesus still beats high. The cross did not destroy their love but the cross has slain their hope. “If Christ is not raised then we of all men most sad. Most to be pitied,” as saint Paul will say. Sadness. It’s the result of failure to realize or know or believe that the resurrection has occurred. Indeed if the resurrection of Jesus Christ has not taken place then we do live in a world where there are no answers to our questions. Where there still remains the ultimate riddles of origin, meaning and destiny. We can identify with their sadness. That strong providence they had expected to come to pass had failed them.

The second thing we see if the promises of Christmas are empty is that these two disciples on the road to Emmaus have what I would call a de-evaluation of their faith in Jesus. They had once no doubt confessed with the other disciples “Thou art the Christ!” Now there is no mentioning on their lips of the term “Messiah.” Instead Jesus has been de-evacuated to the position of a great prophet. So if the resurrection is not true we must re-evaluate our opinion of Jesus. The deciding factor is the balance of whether he was a good man or whether he was indeed the Son of God. If he is not raised from the dead then he was simply a fine and shining light among men. But nothing more.

The third result we see if the promises of Christmas are empty is that the disciples of his, the two on the road to Emmaus are turning back to the old life. They had been caught up with a whirlwind, a feeling of kinship with Jesus. Now those days must be over. The journey so quickly begun now must so soon come to an end. And they’re on their way home. They’re headed out from Jerusalem. What makes it even more as touching is they’re leaving on the third day. A manifestation of the fact that they really had not let the word of the Lord sink deeply into their consciousness, that something would happen on the third day. An announcement he repeatedly made as he was on the way to Calvary that on the third day he would rise.

Their disillusionment is complete as we see how they become skeptics of the women’s testimony of having seen a vision of angels. They are so confirmed in despair themselves that they do not even bother to investigate the tomb. It is other disciples who went to see what it was that the sepulcher was empty. But they themselves without even bothering to investigate were so disillusioned and broken in hope that on the third day, on the afternoon of that day they were heading home.

It’s strategic to note that Luke by telling this story is laying to rest several claims of the opposition to the resurrection of Jesus Christ that have been advanced through the centuries. There have been some who have said that the disciples manufactured the story of the resurrection of Jesus. It’s an illusion and a lie. But the truth is as you read the gospel account and any sensible person can recognize, any rational person could know, the truth is that the disciples of Jesus were both shattered and scattered as a result of his crucifixion. Indeed, as the psalmist said, “I will smite the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.” We see that on the road to Emmaus.

There have been some who have come along and said, The whole story of the resurrection occurred because a group of women became hysterical by mistaking the appearance of a man for an angel. Notice it was not hysterical women who convinced the disciples that Jesus had risen

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from the dead. The disdain that these two disciples on the road to Emmaus showed to the women's testimony is evidenced in the text.

Also it was certainly never an empty tomb that convinced the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. For the empty tomb was there but the two disciples from Emmaus were on their way home. An empty tomb had no power for it still leaves question about what happened to Jesus. Belief in an empty tomb is worthless. Our faith is not in an empty tomb.

One writer has said of the two on the road to Emmaus that their whole speech shows how complete was the collapse of their Messianic hope. How slowly their minds opened to admit the possibility of the resurrection. And how exacting they were in the matter of evidence for it. Even to the point of hesitating to accept angelic announcements. Such a state of mind is not the soil in which hallucinations spring up.

Are then the promises of Christmas true? That is what this story of Christmas is about. It is the coming full circle. It is the revelation of the risen Lord. The babe in Bethlehem's manger became a man. Following his death and resurrection he appears to us, he appeared to the first disciples in form they had not previous seen him as. Their eyes are kept momentarily from recognizing him. Kind of an intriguing concept that says to us in his physical manifestation after his resurrection, while Jesus is the same as before yet there is a difference. There is an ability to assume a form or cause the disciples not to be able to see or recognize the form that he assumes. He is risen.

Because the promises of Christmas are true we see through this story that Christ is our companion. That is the first way in which we see him in this gospel text. He comes along walking in the road. In fact the impetus of the language is that the two disciples were walking and he joins them as a third silent partner to their conversation. After they have gone for some time he begins to ask them questions. It is a thrilling thing to recognize that Jesus is our companion on the road of life. Resurrection does not make him remote. We must remember what it would have been like for Christ personally to have accomplished that tremendous victory of resurrection from the dead. As he comes back from the place of the dead in triumphant form. If you were him, who would you go to? How would you announce it? With what stirring tidings would you greet people with? Would you go to the temple and proclaim it loud where all could here who had been responsible for the death? Would you summon the end of the world at that moment and declare that you were king and displace thrones and empires and emperors and the like? Would you become remote from the people who had walked with you in those days when you were the vulnerable Son of man on the road to Calvary? Jesus in his resurrected form manifests himself as the same person as he was before his resurrection. He wants to be with his people. And he especially has an ear and an eye for the disciple who hurts and ponders and suffers and needs his presence. How like Jesus. Therefore to go after these two sorrowing disciples on the very day of Jesus' own triumph, he thought it worthwhile to walk the seven miles and spend the two hours in comforting two of his disciples. Two of his lonely dejected disciples, two disciples who were not even included in the company of the twelve.

So Jesus becomes, in this story, also our companion. There are roads I would not want to travel without him. As I am going along on a road I might feel that he is not near or that his presence has been withdrawn. But just as surely as I walk that road, Christ draws near and goes with me. And I, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, often am kept from recognizing his presence. But his companionship is sure. There is no road which a disciple will ever walk in which Jesus

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himself will not draw near and go with him. That's the first result of the promises of Christmas being true. He is our companion.

We also see in this appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. But Jesus is the revealer of truth. He opens their mind to understand the scripture. We see a trace almost of humor in the Lord in coming along and asking them this delightful question, "What is this conversation, this talking back and forth that you have between yourselves as you are walking along?" As if he didn't already know what they were talking about and what they were feeling.

But this text of Luke's gospel says to us that the risen Lord did not make himself independent from the scripture. Jesus did not disassociate himself from the revelation that had already been accomplished. Jesus in his pre resurrection manifestation is found in the Bible and after he is raised from the dead he is still at work interpreting and explaining and applying the scripture. If the scripture would become the heart of the Lord teaching to the disciples how much more should the scripture be at the heart of our experience as his people.

Often it is that we read the Bible without understanding it. That is why there is a need for a teacher. The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 found that he was reading Isaiah but not understanding it. Jesus sees that these two disciples representing perhaps all of his disciples had a certain familiarity with the scripture but did not really understand what it said concerning him. He would now begin with these two disciples expounding the Old Testament and how it related to him. What he shared with them and what he shared with the other disciples in those 40 days became the platform by which the early church as it emerged came to understand how the Old Testament spoke of Jesus. I would have liked to have been with Jesus that day when he opened the scripture. We can only conjecture and imagine what he said.

But beginning with the law of Moses which would have been the book of Genesis, he through the prophets and all of the scriptures explained to them the things concerning himself. Some of the things which Jesus may have said to the disciples on that road he may have taught the disciple, himself, as being the seed of the woman who had now bruised the serpents head. He was indeed the sacrificial Son of Abraham. He is the Passover lamb. He is the high priest. He is the prophet who would come who would be like Moses. He would be as the book of Ruth says, our kinsman redeemer. He would be the Nehemiah, the rebuilders of the broken down walls of human life. As he opened the prophet Isaiah he would show how he was the child king with a shoulder strong enough to bear the government, the suffering servant, whose death as the Lamb brings the healing of our transgressions. The prince of peace, the everlasting God. He would explain how he was the substance of every Old Testament sacrifice, how the Old Testament figures of deliverer, king, prophet applied to him. From the psalms he would show that he is the stone which the builders rejected which had become the head of the corner. He is David's son and Lord. He is the prayer of Psalm 22 "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" A psalm which ends in triumph. He is the good shepherd of Psalm 23. The righteous branch of Jeremiah. The faithful husband in Hosea. He is Daniel's stone, cut without hands, smiting the enemy, becoming a mountain and filling the whole earth. He is the great foreign missionary of Jonah in the heart of the earth three days. He is Zachariah's fountain, open for cleansing in the house of David for sins. He is Malachi's son of righteousness, arriving with healing in his wings. And in his panoramic tour of the scripture Jesus reveals to them himself in the Bible.

Three years before the book of the prophet Isaiah had been handed to Jesus. But on the road to Emmaus Jesus evidently had no book within his hand, the book was in his heart. This stranger

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who appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was like a person who had the whole book unrolled within himself. He had Moses and David, Isaiah and Jeremiah by heart. So it is wherever Christ's presence comes to us yet again the scriptures become a living and a burning instrument of God within our heart, encouraging us in moments when we are in despair, convicting us in moments when we are in sin, filling us with faith in moments when we are in doubt. Our hearts burn because Christ is the revealer of God, the interpreter of the scriptures.

Christ always wants the scriptures to burn our hearts with his presence. Isn't it interesting how Jesus revealed himself to these two disciples? He chose to reveal himself by interpreting the word. He might simply have said one word to them as he said to Mary – "Mary" – and they would have known him. He might have shown them his hands and his feet and they would have known him. But he chooses in effect a higher way. These two disciples represent all the disciples who will follow after. Who must get used to knowing the presence of the risen Christ by the understanding of the word. For the disciples who come later will not have the opportunity of hearing his audible voice or touching him in a visible way. It is still the scriptures, which bear witness of him.

So Jesus comes and manifests the promises of Christmas are true by being our companion, by being to us the revealer of truth. And I think also a third result. By being our guest and our host.

The text of the gospel of Luke says that Jesus would have passed on. He appeared to be going further but the disciples constrained him. There are occasions in the gospels when Jesus appears to be passing by and only an active faith stops him and causes him to apply his presence to a person or a situation. Early in his ministry on the Lake of Galilee he was walking on the lake. The disciples were filled with terror when they saw a visage of what they interpreted to be a ghost walking by. And Mark is intriguing in what he says that Jesus meant to pass by them. It was only Peter's shout of despair and deep need that stops the Lord.

Blind Bartimaeus must cry again and again and Jesus will manifest his presence to him. They constrained him. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus said, "Abide with us." We have found that concept of abiding or the concept of a room in the Christmas narrative. It is Luke alone of the gospel writers who tells us that there was no room for Jesus in the inn. Now we come full circle to the end of the gospel. We look back at the Christmas story with certain type of wistfulness and sense of tragedy that the innkeeper missed so much because the inn was full. The innkeeper has become representative of the full things in our life that crowd out the presence of the Lord. But here in this delightful ending of the gospel of Luke we see two disciples who constrain him to come in and abide with them. Because they asked him into their room that evening they had a revelation of his presence.

It is from that story by the way that one of the great hymns of the church has been written. So Jesus is invited in as the guest and wherever Jesus is invited as the guest you will find sooner or later he becomes the host. So as they're taking bread Jesus assumes the position of the host and he breaks the bread. In that breaking the disciples see something. They recognize his presence. Luke does not specifically tell us how they recognized him. When they looked at his hands did they see the piercing of the nails? The kind of commemorative way they saw him break the loaves? They had witnessed before when he had fed the five thousand. Or his traditional way of simply eating with them. How he would lift a blessing and break the bread.

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Luke's concern is not to say how he manifested himself but simply to indicate simply that when Jesus was manifested to their heart he disappeared from their eyes. There was no need further for his physical presence. The disciples must get used to a new way of relating to him. The time is now rapidly at hand for him to ascend to heaven and from now on his presence would be broken in that spiritual way. It was the heart that would have difficulty in seeing him, not the eyes. Promises of Christmas are true. When Christ comes in to our lives as both guest and host.

There's a two way fulfillment or application to our own lives. But for Christ to be the host of our lives we must have as John writes in the book of revelation open the door for he stands knocking. If anyone opens the door, Jesus comes in and will eat and drink with him and enjoy the blessings of Christ's fellowship and his kingdom.

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still Wally was well liked by the other children in his class all of whom were smaller than he. Though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally asked to play ball with them. Or play any game for that matter in which winning was important. Most often they would find a way to keep him out. But Wally would hang around anyway. Not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one and a natural protector paradoxically of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away it'd always be Wally who would say, "Can't they stay? They're no bother."

Wally fancied the idea of being shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year. But the play's director Miss Lombard assigned him to a more "important" role. After all, she reasoned, the innkeeper didn't have too many lines and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

So what happened was the usual large partisan audience gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of shepherd's crooks and Christmas crushes, of beards, crowns, haloes and a whole stage full of squeaky children's voices. No one on or off stage was more caught up in the magic of that night than Wally. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lombard had to make sure he didn't wander on stage before his cue.

Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted backdrop. Wally, the innkeeper, was there waiting. "What do you want?" demanded Wally swinging the door open with a brusque gesture. "We seek lodging," Joseph replied. "Seek it elsewhere!" Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. "The inn is filled." "Sir," Joseph said, "We have asked everywhere in vein. We have traveled far and we are very weary." Wally looked properly stern and shot back, "There is no room for you in this inn!" "Please, good innkeeper," said Joseph. "This is my wife Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired."

Now for the first time the innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment. The prompter whispered from the wings *No, Be gone!* Wally repeated it automatically, "No. Be gone." Joseph draped his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband's shoulder and the two of them started to move away.

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The innkeeper did not return inside his inn however as the script called for. Wally stood there in the doorway watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears. Suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all others. Wally called out "Don't go Joseph! Bring Mary back!" And he said with a bright smile, "You can have my room!"

I kind of think of that's Luke's delightful way of closing his gospel story. Jesus appears in a room first two the two and then to the eleven. He appears in the room of the hearts of all those who will open themselves to his touch, to his presence, to his call.

As we pray, Lord, we ask ourselves the question from the song, Have we any room for Jesus? Room for pleasure, room for business but have we any room for you? May the response of each one of us this Christmas season to you be that of this little delightful boy Wally who cried out when he saw the despair of Mary and Joseph going away: There is room. And may we too like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus as well beseech you and constrain you "Abide with us!" Abide! Lord, abide in our hearts so continually that it would be as though our hearts were ever aglow with your presence. Forgive us for the times we have not seen your presence when you indeed have been there. Forgive us for the times when we have only held your word at a very subconscious kind of a level and it has not gone deep into our heart or our hearing. Break again Lord, your presence among us. Excite us, Lord, with that great message that the angels brought, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth, goodwill toward men." And again the angels' message: "He is risen. He is not here." Our hearts adore and worship you in this Christmas season. There is room in our heart for you. In Jesus' name. Amen.