

## **A Sermon for Easter Day, April 16, 2006**

*The Rev. Stephen C. Scarlett*

One great mystery of Easter is that the disciples are surprised by the empty tomb and don't recognize the Risen Christ when he presents himself. This is a mystery because Jesus told the disciples what was going to happen. In our gospel for Quinquagesima, fifty days ago, Jesus said to the apostles:

Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished. For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: and they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again (Luke 18:31f KJV)

In this passage, St. Luke tells us, "This saying was hid from them. And they understood none of these things." They did not understand the Passion when Jesus predicted it and they did not understand it later on when it actually happened.

In the resurrection appearances in Luke's gospel, we find the cure for the disciples' blindness. In Luke 24:44 NKJV, Jesus appeared to them in the upper room. St. Luke tells us, "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures." Then Jesus said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day."

Before Jesus gave them the gift of spiritual sight, the disciples did not understand why Jesus had to suffer and die. They had their own notions of how God was going to save Israel and they expected Jesus to act accordingly. After Jesus "opened their understanding" they had an "aha!" experience with regard to the Old Testament. They came to see how the sacrifice of Isaac, the Passover lamb, the offerings commanded in the Torah, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and other passages pointed to the Cross.

Spiritual blindness is still the main issue in the conversion of hearts to faith. The Church proclaims the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus as the answer to sin and death. But many do not get it—"This saying is hid from them. And they understand none of these things" As 2 Corinthians says, "If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe" (4:3-4).

The ability to see the risen Christ requires the same gift of spiritual sight and understanding that Jesus gave to the first disciples. We receive this understanding when we come to see how the Cross and Resurrection fulfill the O.T. Scriptures and are the centerpiece of God's plan for the world.

The Risen Christ also reveals himself to us in a personal way through events and experiences in our lives. Jesus revealed himself to Mary Magdalene when he called her by name. Jesus revealed himself to Peter when he restored him to fellowship and gave him back his ministry after his Maundy Thursday fall. Jesus revealed himself to Thomas when he allowed Thomas to touch his hands and his side. So we, who know about Jesus through the Scriptures, come to a personal knowledge of the Risen Christ as he calls us by name to faith, as he forgives us and restores us after we fall, as he gives us tangible evidence of his presence in our lives.

This two-fold pattern of revelation—Scripture and personal encounter—is particularly evident in the

resurrection appearance of Jesus to the two men on the road to Emmaus in Luke's gospel. These two men walked with the Risen Christ for several miles without recognizing him. After a while Jesus had enough of their ignorance. St. Luke describes what happened next,

[Jesus] said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them. And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed *it*, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. (Luke 24:25-31)

These two men came to know the Risen Christ as he explained the O.T. Scriptures to them and as he personally revealed himself to them in the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread.

The discerning reader will recognize in the Emmaus story the pattern for our worship. We have a Liturgy of the Word, in which the Scriptures are read and explained. And we have a Liturgy of the Eucharist, in which we take, bless, break and give bread after the pattern of Jesus. We see the Risen Christ as we are given to understand the biblical revelation and as he reveals himself to each of us in a personal way in the breaking of the bread.

One theme of the resurrection appearances is that you did not have to be there to see him—for those who saw him didn't recognize him anyway. The Risen Christ makes himself known, then and now, by giving us the wisdom to understand the Scriptures and by revealing himself to us in personal ways, especially as he comes to each of us in the sacrament.

On Easter Day, we proclaim, Christ is Risen! This means not only that Jesus rose from the dead two thousand years ago. This means that the Risen Christ is here, in word and sacrament, to be understood and known by us. Let us pray that Jesus will open our understanding so that we can see him and know him. As our Easter Monday collect says, "O God, whose blessed Son did manifest himself to his disciples in the breaking of the bread; Open, we pray thee, the eyes of our faith, that we may behold thee in all thy works."