

**Easter 3A
April 6, 2008
St. David's**

I will be the first to admit that this has been more of a struggle than I ever anticipated. Being a homeless congregation for going on nine months now, has put a strain on all of us. We have worked very hard at living into the spirit of St. David's and continuing to be the church of relationship and inclusion of all. On some levels, we have continued to be successful being that church. After all, look at those here today who have joined us during the last nine months, people who have felt the love of this community without ever having set foot in our church building. But as the rest of you know, it is not the same. In some ways, we feel disconnected from each other for the first time in our lives together. We miss the intimacy we felt so strongly before. Because of this, it has been much more difficult to reach out to others beyond our community and show them what being a part of St. David's is all about. In addition, many of our regular members are not here today and have cut their church attendance drastically. It is not just our adults who are missing in action. Many of our children, especially the ones who were coming to church without their parents, have found

it much more difficult to get here at this odd place and time.

Now my first reaction to all of this is to think, this is really silly. I don't think any of us lack belief that our church will be finished at some point. None of us lack faith in the fact that we are going to be back in our home again. So if we believe, why has it become so difficult to wait this out? Why can't we just continue to live into the St. David's mission statement while we are waiting? Why is it so hard to continue living into relationship with each other in the manner that we had grown accustomed?

I have to tell you, I have been pondering that question for a few months now. I have wondered what it is I am doing wrong and whether I have led you all astray. But lo and behold, in the midst of my confusion and despair, comes today's Gospel. The story of Emmaus just may be my favorite in all of the Bible. I believe it is our best example of how each of us can discover the risen Christ in our lives. What I did not expect of it however, is that it would also answer the dilemma of a church without a building in Page America in the year 2008.

It is such a great story. Cleopas and his unnamed friend tell the

gentlemen who has joined them on their journey to Emmaus all about the accounts of the resurrection they have heard. They obviously believe them to be true. Like us here at St. David's, belief is not the issue. Just as we believe our church will be finished, they believe that the women at the tomb are being truthful about what they saw. But also like us, their belief is not enough to lift them out of their doldrums. They feel disconnected and adrift, just like us.

It is only after they realize who it is that is traveling with them, when they have their own personal experience of the risen Christ, that their lives soar, that their hearts are burning, as Luke describes it.

What the story of Emmaus reminds us, is that despite what many of us were taught about religion, belief is not enough. It wasn't enough for the travelers on the road to Emmaus and it is not enough for us.

What changes all of us, what converts us, what brings the passion into our lives is personal experience. We can talk about the risen Christ as a real entity all we want, but what sets us on fire is when we feel that presence at the depth of our souls. In the same way, we can believe our church is going to be finished all we want, but that is nothing like the experience we will have when it actually happens. An experience

that today's Gospel proposes will set us on fire once again. All of which suggests to me that we here at St. David's are going to be just fine.

Even more important than what Emmaus tells us about our time in limbo waiting for a church, is what it says to us about our faith. Faith happens not when we believe, but when we feel. Faith occurs not when we accept the tenets of a creedal statement, but when we experience the risen Christ in our lives.

This difference between belief and experience applies not only to our waiting for a new sanctuary and the relationship between God and us, but also between us and everything in God's creation. For example, all of you know that I am deeply committed to the belief that humanity is directly connected to all of the natural world. I will tell you how both quantum physics and Native American philosophy teach us about this connection and how our Biblical text suggests the same thing. This belief, however, in and of itself, is not enough to convince anyone that they need to devote their life to caring for all of creation. But the first time you have a dolphin swim with you in the ocean, or have your pet go out of their way to nuzzle you and curl up with you, or the first time

you feel your heart race when you are riding a rapid on the Colorado, that is when our hearts burn. That is when we are awakened. That is what moves people to feel the connection between the earth and God and convinces them that saving creation is a religious calling. When we understand religion as a set of beliefs only, we have removed its passion, we have taken out its soul. My friends, religion is supposed to move us and energize us more than anything else in the world. When we experience God, we live passionate lives, like our travelers to Emmaus.

The million dollar question then is this; how do we move our faith from belief to experience? How do we give our faith life? Was Emmaus an event that just happened to two very lucky people 2000 ago, or is it something that can happen again?

The older I get and the more I listen to the Emmaus story, the more sure I become that this is not a tale about two people at all. Its symbolism is too overwhelming to be about one event that happened one time. I have become convinced that Emmaus is the metaphoric description of every Easter story. I believe it is the symbolic telling of what happened to, not just two people, but thousands of them who

would become the early church. In other words, this is not a one time miraculous event, but something that happened to the entire Christian community. In fact, I believe it is the story of how not just those first thousands experienced Christ after he died, but how all of us can do the same, to this very day.

Note that the miracle of Emmaus begins for the travelers in and through the words of scripture. As we hear, the stranger speaks about Moses and all the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. But the key here is that it is not just recitation of Scripture that moves the travelers, but rather what the stranger does with the text. He interprets it for their time and situation. It is only when he makes the text relevant to them that their hearts begin to burn. This is how religious awakening begins for all of us. We too turn to scripture, but the critical step is to make that scripture come alive as Christ does, by relating it to our own world.

The next lesson of Emmaus is the social nature of our faith. Emmaus makes it clear that from the earliest days of church history, the faithful were aware that an experience of Christ does not happen in a vacuum or on some solitary path to God. In fact, the phrase

“Personal salvation”, words all of us have heard in the church our entire lives, would have been an oxymoron to an early Christian. The story of Emmaus graphically shows us that if we are to have an experience of the risen Christ in our own lives, if we are to awaken our own faith, that will happen only in and through others, not in isolation from them. What connects us to God is relationship with each other.

Interpreting scripture in a community setting then, are the first two steps down the road to Emmaus. But even though Christ is with us on that road, we, like the travelers today, still won’t recognize him unless we take the last step. Recognition of Christ occurs for all of us when we have the courage to invite the stranger to dinner.

The story of Emmaus is meant to be our map to Christ, the early church’s gift to us of how WE can experience Christ in our own lives. It is for me, the most important, powerful story in our history. From it, we learn everything about how Christianity began and how we should live it today. This is how the early Christians came to faith, not believing in something someone told them, but by having their own experience of the risen Christ. All those creeds and stuff came much later, as a result of this Easter experience. Sometimes I think we forget this,

thinking that our faith IS the Apostle's or Nicene Creed. My friends, nobody ever came to faith reciting a creed. Creeds are fine, but they are expressions of a faith AFTER it has been experienced. Our goal should not be to believe in Christ, but rather to experience him, to feel him so deeply that it makes our hearts burn. That is the wonder of the Emmaus story. If we want a passionate faith, if we want to feel our religion, we need to experience God, just as the Emmaus travelers do today. And how do they experience Christ? Through the interpretation of scripture for our lives; in and through each other; and through the presence of a stranger whom they embrace and invite to dinner.

It is no accident that this step by step path to experiencing Christ in our lives is what we do in church every Sunday. First, we gather, remembering that the experience of Christ only happens in community. Next, we listen to scripture. Then, we interpret that scripture for our lives. Finally, we invite everyone, most especially the stranger, to share with us this meal. We will continue to experiment here at St. David's with different worship styles and we will continue to utilize many different kinds of prayers from various traditions to speak to us in the 21st century. But we will never leave the Emmaus formula for

experiencing Christ in our lives. Gather, listen to scripture, respond to scripture, and invite everyone to dinner. Risen Christ, be known to us in the breaking of the bread.

There are also still many in the church who would suggest that communion should be for those who believe the same creedal statement, or for those who have been baptized, or for those who understand the nature of this sacrament. But Emmaus tells me that we have it right. Emmaus tells me that what has brought Christ into our midst is the fact that everyone is invited to this table, particularly the stranger.

Before we ever suggested that you had to believe a certain way to become a Christian, there was Emmaus. Before we ever locked our Bishops in a room and wouldn't let them out until they had written a declaration of faith that we all had to believe in, there was Emmaus. Before any church father would describe faith as an individual path to salvation, there was Emmaus. Before we ever told someone they couldn't have communion because they weren't baptized or had committed a certain sin, or were not the right faith, there was Emmaus.

Emmaus IS our faith statement. It is our story. It is our model for

how we should live our daily lives. Whenever we share our bread and our cup with a pilgrim stranger, whether that be eating spaghetti at the soup kitchen, or giving someone a box of food at the food pantry, or inviting the person next to you here in church to communion, than we create an opportunity for the Risen Christ to be among us. That is what brings passion into our religion and energy into our lives. When we share our bread with others, we bring that opportunity to experience Christ and the passion and energy that comes with it, not only to ourselves but to the person we invite.

Emmaus teaches us that what creates meaning making for human beings is not belief structures, but relationships. Our lives are not enlivened by creeds or doctrines or dogma or belief in something, but rather by experience of and relationship with, each other and with Christ. And I have to tell you all, sometimes, that experience of Christ is so real and so true for me in this setting with all of you, that I can barely hold back the emotion. Put very simply, Emmaus is the truest story I have ever known. May Emmaus continue to happen to all of us. Amen.