

Sermon – Serendipity  
Scripture Readings – Psalm 116:1-14, Luke 24:13-35  
Sunday, May 4, 2014  
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Our first scripture reading is Psalm 116:1-14. The psalmist proclaims a song of thanksgiving to the God who has acted on his behalf to bring healing. In addition to expressing joy and gratitude, the psalmist is resolved to trust God in all future life. This means to acknowledge God's sovereignty and to submit to God's rule and commandments. Hear now God's Holy word. (Read Psalm 116:1-14.)

*1 I love the Lord, because the Lord has heard my voice and my supplications. 2 Because God inclined God's ear to me, therefore I will call on the Lord as long as I live. 3 The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. 4 Then I called on the name of the Lord: "O Lord, I pray, save my life!" 5 Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. 6 The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, God saved me. 7 Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. 8 For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. 9 I walk before the Lord in the land of the living. 10 I kept my faith, even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted"; 11 I said in my consternation, "Everyone is a liar." 12 What shall I return to the Lord for all God's bounty to me? 13 I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, 14 I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all God's people. Amen.*

The second scripture reading on this Third Sunday of Easter is Luke 24:13-35. Today's narrative, unique to Luke, focuses on the appearance of Jesus following his resurrection to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The journey of these two frames the story. But in some ways, it is also a metaphor for each of our journeys and the journey of the church in experiencing the Risen Christ. Although Jesus is standing right in front of us, like Mary in the garden, we do not recognize him. Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener. These two simply see him as a stranger. Hear now the Word of God. (Read Luke 24:13-35.)

*<sup>13</sup> Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles<sup>[a]</sup> from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup> While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup> but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup> And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>18</sup> Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" <sup>19</sup> He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>[c]</sup> who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup> and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup> But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.<sup>[d]</sup> Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup> Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup> and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. <sup>24</sup> Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." <sup>25</sup> Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Messiah<sup>[e]</sup> should suffer these things*

*and then enter into his glory?”<sup>27</sup> Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

*<sup>28</sup> As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup> But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup> When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup> They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us<sup>d</sup> while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” <sup>33</sup> That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup> They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” <sup>35</sup> Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

The title of the sermon: “Serendipity”

*The text: When Jesus was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were open and they recognized him...” Luke 24:30-31a*

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, stay with us. Warm our hearts with the presence of your word, and strengthen our resolve to extend the hospitality of your love and grace to those in need. Give us hearts open to serendipitous encounters and give us eyes to recognize you along our way. Amen.

This past week on April 30 Dale Thomas Rogers completed 28 years as Westminster’s Director of Music and the Arts. His first Sunday leading worship at the organ was May 4, 1986. On this anniversary Sunday our hearts are warmed with gratitude for all the ways Dale enriches the life of our congregation and the Springfield community.

I first met Dale last summer during my interview process as a candidate to serve as your pastor. He was in St. Louis the day of my interview in Springfield so the PNC encouraged me to arrange a visit with him the next day in St. Louis. We originally planned to meet at Kaldi’s, a coffee shop near Forest Park, however following our day in Springfield, I told Peter I wanted to invite Dale to our home as a gesture of hospitality. I was hoping to make an impression on him since it was clear how much he was respected by the PNC. Following our two hour visit over coffee on the deck in our backyard, there was a strong sense of camaraderie and compatibility between us, the feeling that we could work well together, almost as if we had already worked together.

As we all know there is little in life more important than a trusted colleague, and I have to tell you that I have never appreciated a colleague more than I appreciated Dale this past week when I told him my proposed title for today’s sermon was “Déjà vu!” In a very understated and calm manner, he told me I might want to rethink that title. Of course, I was thinking how clever it was given today’s text...they meet a stranger on the road and then realize he is someone they already knew. When I asked Dale “Why,” he said discretely, “That’s the name of Springfield’s strip club.” Needless to say, thank you Dale! (pause)

Our story begins with two disciples traveling together on the road to Emmaus. Emmaus was a little-known town seven miles outside Jerusalem. In fact scholars disagree over the exact location of Emmaus. This uncertainty offers an insight into the story. Emmaus may be

anywhere. This kind of *serendipity, fortuitous happenstance, pleasant surprise...when one discovers something that one was not looking for...* the experience of hearts burning and eyes opening does not occur on only one road, geographically or spiritually speaking. Emmaus comes into sight wherever a path leads us toward communion with God, and whenever we recognize an encounter with the Risen Christ.

On this road of broken dreams, the disappointed disciples are discussing what they have just witnessed on their annual Passover pilgrimage to their holy city, now a place of unspeakable tragedy in the death of the hopeful Messiah. Although Luke spends only a sentence on the conversation between the disciples before a stranger joins them, we know this is a conversation that can last a lifetime...a conversation we have all had about disappointing circumstances in our own lives.

Then, as the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, another character falls into step with them and asks what they were discussing. The question stops them in their tracks. "They stood still," Luke says, suggesting that when God enters a conversation we think we are having with one another---when our perspective is intersected by God's perspective...we cannot help but find ourselves taken aback. The psalmist writes: "*Be still and know that I am God.*" The irony of this encounter is the one for whom they mourn, the one who is the embodiment of their expectations for liberation walks unbeknownst beside them and they do not recognize him. One cannot help but wonder how many times the Risen Christ has been in our midst unbeknownst to us.

Cleopas and his friend extend a gracious invitation to the stranger to stay and eat with them. We are told that Jesus "walked ahead as if he were going on." Custom held that such an invitation should only be accepted when made with insistence. This is a part of our culture as well ...none of us wants to intrude on another's hospitality or stay too long. Luke records that the disciples "urged him strongly" to stay. Jesus' preparation to continue ahead hints at another truth. Jesus will not force himself upon others. Grace will not barge in where not wanted, but neither will it stand apart when invited in.

It was not until Cleopas and his companion sat at table with their Lord that they discovered who their traveling companion was. The fortuitous happenstance, the pleasant surprise, the moment of serendipity was upon them. They had not planned it as a sacred moment, but in the act of hospitality, in the act of sharing their bread with a stranger they recognized the Risen Lord in their fellow traveler.

Although this is not specifically called the Eucharist---the words certainly allude to those familiar phrases we celebrate around our Lord's Table.

*He took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them.* At this point, in the mystery of this fellowship -- Luke tells us: *Then their eyes were open and they recognized him.*

Luke is intentionally making a distinction between perception and recognition. Prior to this personal revelation these two men were aware of the historic Christ, the One who had made the headlines of the local news. But after this unexplainable encounter --- the Risen Christ became the Savior that changed their lives. In this moment, their lives and their perception of the world would never be the same. Something happened that was difficult to explain or articulate.

For these two, they recognized the Jesus when he broke bread with them. For Thomas, he recognized Jesus when he placed his hand in Jesus' side. For Mary, she recognized Jesus when he called her by name, all very personal, intimate experiences.

One of the interesting details of this story is that as soon as the two disciples recognized the Risen Lord, he disappeared from their sight. Alan Culpepper reminds us:

*God's presence is always elusive, fleeting, dancing at the edge of our awareness and perception. If we are honest we must confess that it is never constant, steady or predictable... The mystery of transcendence is always transitory. God's faithful perceive God's presence in fleeting moments, and then the mundane closes in again. For this reason, we learn to treasure experiences in retrospect. The two in Emmaus exclaim, 'Did not our hearts burn within us? One of the secrets of a vigorous spirituality and a confident faith is learning to appreciate the importance of meeting God in the past as well as in the present.*

When Jesus said farewell to the disciples he shared that God would send the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit to remind us of Christ's teachings. And more than remind us, to be Christ's presence with us in the ordinary but also in those holy, serendipitous moments when our eyes are opened to the mystery and wonder of God in our midst.

In as much as the Emmaus experience emphasizes the personal revelation of God on our faith journeys, Luke tells us that Christ disclosed himself by interpreting *to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets.*

He taught them, he placed his life and death and resurrection in the context of human history from the Judao-Christian perspective. Without this context, without an informed knowledge of Scripture in our faith tradition, personal, religious encounters may not be with Jesus of Nazareth at all...but merely with our own projection of who God is or who we want God to be. There is a lot of talk about spirituality in our culture today. Authentic religious experiences need to be measured against the integrity of faith and a life that reaches beyond one's self. The Risen Christ is about loving kindness, doing justice and walking humbly with God.

As we continue our journey to Emmaus, may our eyes be open to the ways we can extend hospitality and, by the grace of God, may we discover ourselves in the presence of the Risen Christ. Amen.