

INHERIT THE EARTH  
EYES OPEN

Texts on Sunday, April 21, 2013

*Luke 24: 13-35; Revelation 21: 1-6*

Nothing is as beautiful as union and unity of mind. Nothing compares with being one—provided each individual is honored and respected. *Each individual!* Inside that little word, you can hear the matchless value it declares—undividable, must-not-be-broken, *I am* somebody, an individual. Yet individuals long to be not set apart. We seek unity, community, love, peace—a *new heaven and a new earth*. The matchless value in the hearts of all peoples in all times is that we may be one. *E pluribus unum*, reads the Great Seal of the USA: “Out of many, one.” To preserve the integrity of each and the unity of the one—this is hard. It is what makes life hard in our very imperfect nation. It is what makes life hard in our very imperfect church—hard for the one deep reason, that we long to be our self, *and* we long to be together. And we want both now, because time is short. Every love song, every national anthem, every hymn to God, every *I have a dream!* is woven from the wondrous deep wish that each one *be* one, and that all may be one. All the promises of God revealed to us through our faith aim for peace along this path. Christians call it the way of the Cross.

But we cannot get to unity through our longings. We are too disordered by our own worries. Therefore, profound experiences of joined humanity usually come only in the face of mortal danger. We have seen it in Boston these last days, both in the vast cooperation of the citizenry to apprehend the bombers and in the sudden joy spilling into the streets to thank the authorities after the manhunt was over. When the murderous mayhem at Newtown still stunned our spirits, we experienced a depth of unity—but last week, disunity and party spirit ruled in Washington as the power of the people to join in unified action against gun violence was shattered. In the aftermath of natural disasters like Sandy, the beauty of community builds up. If a terrible war ends, the victors, though not the vanquished, join in joy. Thus danger and release from danger unify those who see the same danger.

But sometimes there is a shift in how we see. I have told you before how in the small congregation I first served, the church’s joined concern for several men facing the threat of death from AIDS broke up their homophobia, and love flowed. When with new medicines, some of the men lived and are still living, the love kept flowing. That church was changed.

This is how church works—when it works. New eyes grow to see those who were invisible, who were hated or ignored. This power to see and make

a beloved community comes from above, we say, not from ourselves, because we have no evidence that we can love so fully on our own say-so. Because this is how church works, when it works, the beloved story from Luke which we heard this morning was given as a guide to the church. It is a story for wandering and troubled hearts. It is a reminder that God gives unity—not in the ordinary way, namely, to people joined in mortal dread of danger, but—to those who are learning to walk the way of the Cross.

Like all the other Resurrection stories in the Bible, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus do not recognize the risen Lord. Let's not try to explain that with a fancy theory. Just let the story be the story and let it mean this: Being blind to God's presence is the basic human condition. Not understanding what God has been revealing to us through long ages is our basic condition. When Luke wrote this story down, Resurrection day was about fifty years past! Don't you think the church Luke wrote for was feeling they had come too late in time; that they never had a chance to know Jesus personally as some of the elders had, and now even they were dying off, and who could offer a true witness, with Jesus long gone, and his friends soon too?

Luke wrote for a church uncertain of the presence of God in the absence of Jesus. That's who this story is for. Do you know such a church? According to this story, wherever two or three are *not* gathered in his name, but are walking away from the rest of the church, feeling confused and doubtful about the power of God in the absence of Jesus; wherever two or three are giving up on the whole and headed for their own comforts, you've got a church that needs to tell this story again. Does this sound like your church?

God's presence comes alongside the two, but they do not recognize him. Being blind to God's presence is the basic human condition. He opens their minds to understand everything, and though they listen, though they go to Bible class and listen to the sermon, still they do not recognize him. Familiar? Then comes the test of further separation. Jesus is going on. And they say, *Abide with us. Fast falls the evening tide; the darkness deepens. Lord, with us abide.* Here! The instant of the basic unity we all share, when we see a poor one with no home and no protection and we will not accept that that one should endure the night without community. So Jesus went with them.

See now how eyes open and unity and integrity are restored. For when he was at table and he took the bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. In that instant he vanished from their sight. In that instant, they understood themselves secured eternally, in the promises of God. Then they could understand all that had been revealed to them. Then they got up and rushed to Jerusalem to join in joy with the community they had abandoned in confusion. This is

your story. God will give you eyes open to recognize God's presence, no matter how separated or confused you may be in the aftermath and anxiety of murder, mayhem, injustice or dashed dreams. There is one thing to do, however. In spite of our blindness to God's presence, in spite of our separation and disunity, in spite of our tiredness, let the stranger in. Feel the unity with the other in extremity. Open the door. God will open your eye.



Now, what I am about to say will seem like changing the subject—but it is not. Last Sunday, we reflected on the reality of climate change. We said it is of such moment in human affairs that to change the subject after brief consideration would be faithlessness. We heard that the stable eco-system on which humanity and all creatures depend, and which served as the canvas on which the worldview of our own religion was drawn—that stable eco-system is gone. We have unpredictably altered the whole system which supports our only home.

Through two thousand years, Christianity has proved a highly adaptable religion. Some of its victories have the tragic character of empire, where power and wealth are amassed in utter scorn of the Lord. However, countless millions of Christians have also found through the faith a strength to love. When church works, we feel that God is revealing Godself to us through Christ, both for us as individuals in our yearning for integrity transcending all our losses, and also for the upbuilding of communities in peace and in justice.

However, no religion, not Christianity nor any other, has ever helped humans meet the tests that climate change will now bring to the world. Will Christian faith help its people to adapt to new conditions with integrity and in peace, or will the religious become a tragic hindrance to integrity and peace? This is the urgent question, for a new heaven is indeed coming, yet it is one filled with more CO<sub>2</sub> than has ever been existed since green plants were something new under the sun; and a new earth is coming, one not like any earth we have inhabited. This is the revelation. Whoever quits reading this news, or denies it, in favor of the dream in the book of *Revelation* which promises glorious salvation for 144,000 precious of God, and hell for the rest of billions, has already chosen a religion of war, not the faith of Jesus Christ.

We must cease wishing that Sunday morning would simply re-charge our batteries. That wish is not great enough for who you are and who God is calling you to be. But do not fear. Since climate change is coming, faithful humanity must make climate change the medium through which we become aware as never before of who we are before God and what we are meant to be. Although it is certainly not going to be easy to give up the comforts to

which we are accustomed, giving up our life for the sake of others is exactly what we say we yearn to learn when we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.” We proclaim that we are being rooted and grounded in God every day, made more ready to relinquish what God asks of us, so that we may know ourselves in our full integrity, and that we may love one another, even the stranger we have not seen, even the enemy we despise.

Yes, we confess that we have been to God’s presence; it is the basic human condition. And yes, we have been willfully blind to the effects of our use of fossil fuels. We have not been paying attention to God’s communication. And yes, we cannot imagine how much will change in years to come. But in all this, we are like those two disciples walking along the road in the Presence of God, ignorant of him. To them, the Lord declared, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!”

Now is the time. Invite the stranger in. Open the door. Receive your gift of eyes open. See the facts. Sometimes we wonder why Riverside does not overflow with younger adults. But have we put ourselves in their shoes? In a blog post, Prof. David Archer, a climate scientist at the University of Chicago, writes, “Since the 2005 publication of our textbook for the class *Global Warming: Understanding the Forecast*, non-science-major student enrollment has gone through the roof. It’s all I’ve been able to teach the last few years . . . It is the largest class on campus, with 400-500 students a year out of an annual class of 1,400.” We who are older must open our eyes to the situation that younger generations will live into. If we do not, how can there be between us any beloved community?

Invite the stranger in before extremity shuts all our doors with wars and fear and strife. It will be the great test of our faith. Will we follow the old way, by which clans and classes, facing danger, split off into parties seeking whatever advantage they can manage? Or will we follow Christ and invite the stranger in, and receive from our God eyes open in such confidence for the living of these days that we will let go of such privilege and power we have, and return rejoicing to build up the beloved community, that all may be one. On the way of the Cross, we will find our self in Christ.

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