

“Hearts Burning Within Us”
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Based on Luke 24: 13-35
Longview Presbyterian Church--May 1, 2011

I remember the whole thing, clear as day. As though it happened yesterday. My husband and I had left Jerusalem on our way home after Passover and all the sad—no, “sad” isn’t the right word—terrible events that had taken place. We planned to stay the night in Emmaus and finish our journey the next day. As we walked, we went over and over all that had happened in the last week. We had so many questions: how did it come to this? why did it come to this? how could it be that Jesus was not the messiah, when we were all so certain he was? can we still believe all he taught us? what do we do now? We had an endless list of questions, but so few answers. We were filled with so many different emotions. Of course, we were sad. We were grieving over the loss of not only a dear friend, but a spiritual teacher and leader, and not only a leader, but the one we thought would redeem us. Save us. The messiah. We were grieving the loss of hope.

But we also were having a bit of a... difference of opinion. You see, that morning, several of the women went to the tomb to properly prepare Jesus’ body since there was not time to do so before the Sabbath. I was not with them as I had much to do to prepare for our journey back home. Oh how I wished I had gone with them... When they got to the tomb, they found the stone rolled away from the tomb and Jesus’ body was missing. Of course, their first thought was that it had been stolen but before they had much time to think about it, two men appeared in dazzling white clothes and told them that Jesus had been risen from the dead. They ran back to tell the disciples but the men all thought it was an idle tale. Peter was the only one who thought it might be true. He went to the tomb and saw it empty. But the others, including Cleopas, dismissed it. But I knew better. Or at least, I *hoped* better. I knew that the Marys, both Magdalene and James’ mother, Joanna, and the other women wouldn’t make up a story like that. Maybe they imagined it in their grief, but how can several people imagine the same thing at the same time? No, it had to be true.

In fairness to my husband and the others, it was hard to believe that Jesus was alive. We knew all about the resurrection. We thought we understood what the resurrection would be. It would happen on “the last day” for all the faithful. But resurrection of just one, even if that one were Jesus, that was not what we expected. It didn’t make sense. But I wasn’t much in the mood for fairness. Honestly, I was not particularly happy with Cleopas for not believing my friends. If I had been one of the women at the tomb, would he have believed me or dismissed my word, too?

Anyway, as we went, suddenly a man was walking with us. I have no idea where he came from or how he got there, but suddenly, there he was. He turned out to be Jesus, but for some reason I’ll never understand, we didn’t recognize him. And this stranger, as I thought him to be, had the audacity to ask us what we were talking about, what we had been discussing. The question stopped us in our tracks. Never mind the fact that it was none of his business what we were talking about, it just seemed so odd that he wouldn’t

have *known* what we were talking about. Everyone was talking about it. Everyone knew. And most people were able to guess that we were followers of Jesus, just by the fact that we're Galileans. I couldn't begin to answer him, but finally my husband Cleopas said, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" Then the man asked, "What things?" (as if he didn't know) Together we began telling him the story. I thought that as soon as we began the story, he would realize what we were talking about and we wouldn't have to tell him the whole story but he never did let on that he knew. We told him all about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. We told him how our chief priests and leaders handed Jesus over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. That besides all this, it was now the third day since these things took place. Then Cleopas said, "Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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." Hmph! They found it just as the women said because the women were telling the truth!

And I was just about to say so when the man said, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" And I should have known then that it was Jesus. That's *just* what Jesus would say. And he amazed us by explaining the whole thing to us in terms of the scriptures, from Moses, all through the prophets, he interpreted everything about Jesus in all the scriptures. And still, illumined though we were, we still couldn't figure out who the stranger was.

When we got to Emmaus, the man walked ahead as if he were going on. But we urged him strongly, to stay with us, because it was almost evening and the day was nearly over. So he went in to stay with us. Of course, eating and drinking together around the same table is an ancient form of human intimacy. Acts of hospitality, especially to a stranger, are risky. By welcoming a stranger, we make ourselves vulnerable. But it is a risk that Cleopas and I are always willing to take, but especially with this man, who was so obviously our spiritual brother.

It's not customary for the guest to act as host at the table. But when this man took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to us, we had no doubts that that was right. Finally our eyes were opened, and we recognized he was Jesus. But before we had a moment to welcome him as Jesus, to express our joy or to ask any questions, he vanished from sight.

Naturally, our plans to stay in Emmaus and then continue home were immediately forgotten. News this good must be shared! So, even though it was already dark and a seven mile journey back to Jerusalem, we left as soon as possible to tell the others what had happened. I hoped that this time they would believe.

Our trip back to Jerusalem was the opposite of the trip to Emmaus, not only in terms of the direction traveled. While our trip from Jerusalem was slow and sad, re-living the painful past week, disagreeing over much of it, our return trip back was fast and joyful, re-living the past few hours with Jesus, agreeing about everything. I asked Cleopas, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" We knew that our recognition of Jesus was a gift from God.

When we finally got to Jerusalem, we found the eleven and the others already gathered together though it was late at night. They told us "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then we told what had happened to us on the road, and how Jesus had been made known to us in the breaking of the bread.

Despite all that Jesus explained to us, both in his lifetime and on the road to Emmaus that Easter evening, there is still so much I don't understand. But over the years I've had a lot of time to think about and pray about it. And here are some of the things I do know. For one thing, Jesus' resurrection was not just a miracle of a revived corpse, like when he raised Lazarus. In Jesus' resurrection, the plan and reign of God are fulfilled.

Also, I remember just how important hospitality is. Whenever we welcome a stranger, we very well could be welcoming Christ. Indeed, he said as much when he said whoever has fed the hungry, clothed the naked or visited the prisoner has done so to me.

Since that day, I try to recognize Christ's presence in my life daily. And I can never forget how my heart burned within me when the risen Lord was with us. He has promised to be with us always and I try to remember that feeling, the feeling of my heart on fire, whenever I need to feel Christ's presence.

And, I remember that Jesus did not force this way into the intimacy of dining with us in Emmaus. He left it to us to continue with or without him. He left it to us to invite him in or not. And isn't it the same in our lives? Christ leaves it to us to try to go on with or without him. He leaves it to us to invite him into our hearts or not. Every day I invite him into my life and into my heart. Will you join me?