

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

April 23, 2023 – 3RD SUNDAY OF EASTER, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Jesus Walks With Us, Too*”

First Lesson	Acts 2:14a, 36-41	(St. Peter preaches, “Repent and be baptized!”)
Psalter	Psalms 116:1-3, 10-17	(I love the Lord and will fulfill my vows to Him)
Second Lesson	1 Peter 1:17-23	(Having been ransomed by God’s love, love one another)
Gospel	St. Luke 24:13-35	(Two travelers encounter the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus)

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright sent a telegram from Kitty Hawk, North Carolina to their sister back in Dayton, Ohio. It read: “First sustained flight today for fifty-nine seconds. Hope to be home for Christmas.” She was so excited she took the telegram to the local newspaper for release. The next morning the headline read: “Popular Local Bicycle Merchants to be Home for Holidays.” The editor completely missed the point! The Wright Brothers’ plane had *flown in the air for almost a whole minute!*¹

And, as Jesus’ two disciples walked along the road to Emmaus, telling their story to a stranger, they, too, had missed the point. They hadn’t connected all the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah would suffer and die with Jesus’ own words that He would rise again. If they had, they wouldn’t have been so sad. They would have understood that Jesus’ crucifixion and death had to take place—so that He could rise from the dead.

It was only when Jesus explained to them all the Scriptures about Himself that they *began* to understand. Even then, their comprehension was still a bit fuzzy. Not until they invited Jesus to have supper with them did it all begin to come together. Only when He takes, breaks, and blesses the bread in their humble home in Emmaus, do these two recognize the risen Lord. Later, they recalled, “Were not our hearts burning within us we walked with Him on the road and He explained Scriptures to us?” Yes, they were slow on the uptake, but aren’t we all, at times? We hear God’s Word in church, but it goes in one ear and out the other. We do our devotions at home, and half-an-hour later, can’t remember what we read. There are days when our prayers only reach the ceiling.

Not only were the Emmaus travelers slow to get with the program, but also, they had *expectations* of Jesus: “We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel,” they told Him. “We wanted You to fix everything, to conquer the Romans and free our nation.” Like them, we, too, have our expectations of what Jesus should do for us, situations we insist He work out, things we yearn to see changed or prevented—whether or not these expectations are in line with God’s will and plan for us.

Yes, in many ways, all of us are like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus. We, too, have questions about our faith, and at times, feel that God has let us down. We find it hard to live the Gospel, to live the words Jesus taught us in His Sermon on the Mount.

“Why do I have to forgive my enemies? They don’t care!” “What good does it do, to turn the other cheek and just become a doormat?” “And how can I be blessed if I’m poor, or mourning, or persecuted?” We don’t get it, either.

But if we respond that way, we, too, miss the point. We need to remember that Jesus is always with us, whether or not we recognize His presence, to *help us* live the way He commands. He *knows* we can’t do it on our own. Neither could the Emmaus travelers. They needed Jesus walking *with them*, to have their hearts and minds opened to God’s truth and plan.

Today’s Gospel shows us three ways Jesus is with us, now that He is risen from the dead. First, He is with us in our faith community. The two disciples had communion with each other as they walked home from Jerusalem, but they lacked the foundation and essence of *community*, which is the presence of Christ. After Jesus met them on the road, they had true community.

The second way Jesus remains with us is in God's Word, Sacred Scripture. It's interesting that as Jesus walked along with the two sad disciples, He didn't make small talk or try to cheer them up. Rather, He explained to them all the biblical prophecies about the Messiah: that He must suffer and die, and rise again, to form His Church, which would carry on His message and ministry.

Finally, Jesus is with us in the Sacraments, especially the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. It was in the breaking of the bread that the two disciples recognized Jesus. We, too, meet Him at the Table in the breaking of the bread.

When we come to Sunday Mass, we experience all three ways of meeting and knowing Jesus with us: First, we encounter our community of believers, and in their smiles, hugs, and the care and concern we offer one another, we feel Jesus' presence. Second, we are offered the Sacred Scriptures. Listening to them read aloud is as if we were listening to God Himself, and in the Gospels, to Jesus Himself. And finally, the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the most important sacrament of the other six, because only in this one do we relive the suffering and death of Jesus. And, in His words, "Do this in remembrance of me," Christ calls us to die to *our* sins, die to *our* selves, and die to *our* priorities.

When we understand that Jesus is calling us to be self-effacing; surrender our will to another's; or quietly carry out a sacrificial ministry, that kind of humility and servitude can grate on us. It's just not easy. Our selfish instincts push back, and resentment can quickly build up. But we must take our clue from Jesus: that according to God's plan, suffering—and even death—lead to resurrection and life eternal. We need to remind ourselves that each "little death" of self that we enact *will* result in a blessing—if not for us, then for the other person we are helping, encouraging, caring for, or standing by.

During this Easter season, joy—not happiness—should be our predominant sensibility. *Happiness* is circumstantial. It comes and goes far too easily. But *joy* is from the Lord, and it will lodge deep in our hearts and fill our souls and minds, if are open to receiving it from Him. The two disciples walking along were sad. Jesus knew they were mourning. But when He revealed Himself to them through the Scriptures and the Eucharistic gesture, their joy returned! In fact, they were so excited, they ran the approximately six miles back to Jerusalem to report to the rest of the disciples about their joy-filled experience of the Risen Lord. Jesus wants to fill us with that joy, as well.

Saint Mother Teresa understood the importance of a smile. In her book, *A Gift for God*, she wrote, "Some people came to Calcutta, and before leaving, they begged me: 'tell us something that will help us to live our lives better.' ... I said: 'Smile at each other; smile at your wife, smile at your husband, smile at your children, smile at each other—it doesn't matter who it is— and that will help you to grow ... in greater love for each other.'"²

Finally, a story about a little boy who knew all about the secret of Easter, that since His rising from the dead, Jesus lives in our hearts. The boy was scheduled for open-heart surgery. "Tomorrow morning," the surgeon began, "I'll open up your heart—" "—And," the child interrupted, "you'll find Jesus there." The surgeon looked up, annoyed, and continued: "I'll cut your heart open to see how much damage has been done." "But when you open up my heart," said his young patient, "you'll find Jesus there." The doctor looked to the parents, who just sat quietly, smiling gently.

"When I see how much damage has been done, I'll sew your heart and chest back up and I'll plan what to do next." "But you'll find Jesus in my heart," the young boy insisted. "The Bible says He lives there. The hymns all say He lives there. You'll find Him in my heart." The surgeon had had enough. "I'll tell you what I'll find in your heart," he declared coldly. "I'll find damaged muscle, low blood supply, and weakened vessels. And I'll find out if I can make you well." "You'll find Jesus there too," the young boy persisted. "He lives there." The surgeon left in a huff.

After the surgery, the doctor sat in his office, recording his notes from the procedure: “Damaged aorta, weakened pulmonary vein, widespread muscle degeneration. No hope for transplant, no hope for cure. Therapy: Painkillers and bed rest. Prognosis,” here he paused, “death within one year.” He stopped the recorder, but there was more to be said.

“Why?” he cried aloud. (Clearly, he was speaking to God.) “Why did You do this? You’ve put him here; You’ve given him this pain; and You’ve cursed him to an early death. *Why?*” The surgeon’s tears were hot, but his anger was hotter. “You created that boy, and You created that heart. He’ll be dead in months. *Why?*”

Thus, a dialogue began between the physician and God. And in that vulnerable conversation the frustrated surgeon discovered a new understanding of God’s wisdom, mercy, and love, even amidst pain, suffering, and imminent death. He laid his head on his desk and wept.

Later, he sat beside the boy’s bed, as the parents sat across from him. The boy awoke and whispered, “Did you cut open my heart?” “Yes,” said the surgeon. “What did you find?” the child asked. After a very long pause, the surgeon replied, choking back tears, “I found Jesus there.”³

As the surgeon found out, in times of illness and suffering, pain and grief, anxiety and despair, there is only one Person to whom we can turn—Christ who dwells within our hearts, Christ who is God, and God who is Love.

If love is not at the heart of the universe, nothing else we believe matters. As First Peter (1:22, LB) exhorts us: “Now you can have real love for everyone because your souls have been cleansed from selfishness and hatred when you trusted Christ to save you; so see to it that you really do love each other warmly, with all your heart.”

Let us pray:

“Lord Jesus, we thank You that even though You had to return to Heaven to sit at the right hand of Your Father until You come again, You found many ways to remain with us, so that we might not lose hope. Fill us with Your joy that the world can neither give us, nor take away from us. And grant us the grace to share the joy and hope of Easter with all whom we encounter. This we ask in Your Holy Name, O Risen Christ, Savior of the World. *Amen.*”

¹ Adapt. “Christmas – Missing the Point,” n.d. [Preaching.com](https://www.preaching.com/sermon-illustrations/christmas-missing-the-point/) <https://www.preaching.com/sermon-illustrations/christmas-missing-the-point/> 14 April 2023.

² Adapt. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *A Gift for God: Prayers and Meditations* (New York, HarperOne Reprint, 2003).

³ Adapt. Gerard Fuller, “Easter 3A 4/12/02, Luke 24:13-35, The Road to Emmaus” 5 April 2002, via <padre@tri-lakes.net> 13 April 2023.