

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Second Sunday of Easter
April 15, 2007
Luke 24:13-35

"An Easter Prayer for our Time"

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Our Gospel lesson for this day reminds us that even though it is a week later, we are still very much in the Easter season. Indeed it would take us back to the events of that first Easter day. While we will review the events described in the Gospel we will also emphasize the words which began as a simple invitation of hospitality but which can also be seen in the words of our theme as "An Easter Prayer for Our Time."

I. The Setting

We have a visual aid for the sermon this morning as well. Before you is the picture that normally hangs in the council room in the church office building. It is a familiar piece of Christian art and there are probably thousands of copies of this painting in homes and churches. We might honestly say that the artist has taken some liberties with Judean geography, for anyone who has been to the Holy Land could tell you that there are not such large and lush trees on the dry and rocky road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. But the picture may help you to visualize the scene described in the text.

It must have been a sad and lonely walk for those two disciples on that Easter afternoon as they returned to their home in the village of Emmaus. It was in all likelihood about a two hour journey that they were taking, about 7 miles in our reckoning (the distance from the lakefront to Mayfair Mall). They are deep in their own thoughts and conversation. They are speaking of the events of the past days. Indeed their concentration is so great that they hardly notice the Stranger who has joined them on their journey until he speaks to them: "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" And they stop, their faces downcast. The sorrow of those events is brought even more clearly to them as they must share the news with the Stranger. Cleopas, one of the disciples is amazed. "Haven't you heard the news? You must not know what has happened in these days" "What things?" the Stranger asks. And then the words flow out most likely in great sorrow and grief: "About Jesus of Nazareth--a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. He was handed over by the chief priests and rulers and sentenced to death. And they crucified him. We had hoped he was going to redeem Israel." But for these two now that hope was gone. They could certainly not see any future in their trust in this Jesus.

And yet as Cleopas continued speaking, it was clear that they knew more. But their eyes and minds were blinded to the reports that were being given as much as their eyes were blinded to the Stranger who walked with them. For they tell of the message of the women and the message of the angels who said he was alive. And they share the corroborating testimony of

Peter and John who also found the tomb empty. But they conclude, "Him they did not see." He must still be dead. For many people today as well, they act as if Jesus were still dead. They cannot see.

And then the Stranger speaks: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Oh, what a Bible class that must have been. Indeed, the time passed quickly for soon they had reached the village of Emmaus, and the Stranger appeared to be going further. But the two disciples urge him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening, and the day is almost over." The Stranger accepts their kind invitation. But as they sit down to eat their evening meal, suddenly their lives will never be the same again. The Stranger breaks all the familiar rules of Middle Eastern hospitality. He is now the host. He takes the bread and gives thanks, He breaks it and gives it to them. What a familiar action. So familiar indeed! Their eyes are opened. They recognize Him. He is a Stranger no more. It is Jesus! The Lord is risen! And he vanishes from their sight. What joy and gladness fill their hearts. They say, in effect, "We should have known sooner" for "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us on the road and opened up the Scriptures to us?" And they cannot wait to share the news. They return to Jerusalem. They walk back the seven miles. They find the Eleven already joyous with the news of the resurrection but they share with them their own joy as they saw Jesus as he broke the bread.

II. The Prayer

What can we on this day take from this text? As I said at the beginning what could be more appropriate than the words of the invitation of the Emmaus disciples, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." That was a simple gesture of hospitality--but as they were soon to discover it was a prayer as well. The One they had invited to stay was the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The echoes of that prayer have imprinted themselves in the mind of the church in many ways. They are echoed in the beloved evening hymn, "Abide with Me, Fast Falls the Eventide." They are also the basis for the great hymn of the Reformation era by Nicolas Selnecker "Lord Jesus Christ, With Us Abide" as well as inspiring the hymn we sang before the sermon. The thoughts are also expressed in the mealtime prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our Guest."

What more could we ask than that Jesus might stay with us. But this raises several questions--How will He stay? When will He stay? The first question, How?, gives us an opportunity to recall the Lord's presence with us. As He spoke to those two disciples on the road to Emmaus and opened up the Scriptures to them so also the Scriptures are a divine reminder of Christ's presence with us. He is with us in His word of grace. The risen Lord still speaks to each of us in a powerful, life changing way in the words of the Scripture. They still teach us that the Christ had to suffer these things and then enter his glory. As Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures for in them you think that you have eternal life and these are the

Scriptures which testify of me.”

The Lord is also present with us in other ways as well. He lives in us by the power of the Spirit in our Baptism. We belong to Him. We are baptized into Him and we have received His name in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He stays with us by His grace. And of course, He is really, truly and powerfully present in the Sacrament of His body and blood. Commentators have pointed out the similarity of the words in the text for today as Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them with the words of institution for the Sacrament of the Altar. For in this sacrament He is present with us as well. There he gives us the forgiveness of sins in a personal, visible way. “Stay with us, Lord” That is our prayer.

But then comes the question, when? The Emmaus disciples invited Jesus to stay with them for it was evening, the day was almost over. That was literally true on that day. Now we could say it is also true in another way as well. Is it evening? No, not literally it isn't. But think of the world around us. Think of the ways in which the evils of this world would indicate that the evening is approaching. We hear the admonition of the Apostle, “Work while it is still day before the night comes when no one can work.” The darkness often encroaches. But people will say--Nonsense, things have never been better! According to what standard? ... Current events applicaton. The prayer is certainly worthwhile, “Stay with us, for it is almost evening.” For we have here no continuing city. We are a pilgrim people just passing through. The things of this age will all pass away as the Lord has promised. You can be sure of that. Only those things which are rooted in Him will remain.

And then finally, the words of our text are an Easter prayer for all time on an individual level as well. For we would personally ask the Lord to abide with us in the evening of our lives until our final day comes. [Marion Lawrenz and Ada Berner]. And the promise of Easter, the assurance of the Risen Lord is that He will do just that. Death itself could not hold Him and it will not hold us either. We will be safe in His hands.

Hold thou Thy cross before my closing eyes.
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.
Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee.
In life in death, O Lord, abide with me.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.