

## **CHRIST ON THE ROADWAY**

### **Year A, Easter 3 – 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35**

The author of our Second Reading this morning has a magnificent insight into the community of Gentiles in Asia Minor to whom he is writing concerning their place in the growing number of Jesus' post-Resurrection disciples. He says to them, "You have been born anew...through the living and enduring word of God."

For me, that comment, as understated as it is, speaks the truth concerning Jesus' resurrection and the truth concerning the emergence of what will eventually be recognized as the church. You and I would not be here this morning, were it not for our being formed by the living and enduring word of God - the good news of God revealed in the life, teaching, preaching, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' voice, his message, is unique in the history of humankind. Other teachers, other traditions, can quite legitimately claim threads and themes from what Christians call the gospel – "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is a good example – but it is the proclamation of Jesus Christ that lives and endures through virtually every force that seeks its destruction, through age after age of misrepresentation and distortion by those who claim to be Jesus' disciples, through false doctrine, poor theology, abuse of power, and even the inherent evils resulting from institutionalizing faith. Nothing can compromise the love that burns as it seeks justice, the love that transforms enemies into friends, the compassion that converts greed and self-centeredness into generosity and action on behalf our neighbour in need; the openness that replaces exclusion with welcome, the humility that substitutes blame with forgiveness. No stone of human nature is unturned by the gospel of Jesus Christ; there is no law or philosophy or belief system that touches the human condition so deeply and then heals it, as does the gospel proclaimed by Jesus. The word of God in Jesus Christ does live and endure from generation to generation, from culture to culture, from civilization to civilization, from millennium to millennium. "In Christ there is no east or west" we sing in one of the foundational hymns of our tradition, "in him no south or north, but one community of love throughout the whole wide earth." We have a long way to go before the living and enduring word blesses that whole wide earth, but the good news of the gospel, the good news of this morning's Gospel, in fact, is that we are not alone. Christ walks with us; Christ opens the scriptures to us so that we can continue the world-saving work he began pre-Resurrection; Christ is at home with us as we break bread together in his name.

One of the test questions at my Call interview twenty-plus years ago was to comment on the weekly celebration of Holy Communion. A month before my predecessor, Pastor George Mayer, completed his pastorate with this congregation, he announced that Christ Church was moving to weekly Communion. Pastor John Boehmer became the interim pastor upon George's departure, and, as interim, he quite rightly responded to requests that the old pattern of monthly Communion be restored with the answer that "I am the interim pastor, and it is not my place to make any changes." And so, my response to the Christ Church Call Committee was to identify the lack of consultation in the congregation's move to weekly Communion as problematic for them, but also to note that twelve years before, our synod in convention had passed a memorial to the congregations of the Eastern Synod, asking the congregations to move to more frequent celebration of Holy Communion with the eventual aim of celebrating Holy Communion each Sunday of the church year. I said to the Call Committee, "The Christ Church process notwithstanding, perhaps we should take seriously the memorial our synod passed twelve years ago. Why don't we try it for a year, and then we'll have a better understanding of how it feels to have Holy Communion each week." Later that winter I was called to Christ Church, Waterloo, and together, we began a trial year of Communion every Sunday.

I must tell you that there wasn't a sermon I preached that year that didn't mention how interdependent Word and Sacrament were in the life of discipleship. Before the year was up, one of our members who was most opposed to having Holy Communion every Sunday came to me, unprompted, and told me that he understood how important it was; that for him, it now completed Sunday worship. He said, "I don't want to go back to Sundays without Communion. I would miss it too much!"

There isn't a Sunday when I don't give thanks for this congregation's renewal through the grace of weekly Communion. And to have this morning's Gospel as the heart and centre of this twentieth anniversary Sunday, the Gospel that announces our recognizing Christ's real presence among us in the "breaking of

the bread," is beyond meaningful. In retrospect, we can see that we have been formed and nurtured spiritually by our weekly gathering as one community with Christ at our centre.

As we celebrate today, however, we must acknowledge our whole history as a congregation. It is true that we have the last twenty years on our minds and hearts this morning, but I know with more certainty than anyone, I expect, how the last twenty years sit firmly on the foundation laid by our founding pastor, Roy Grosz, my immediate predecessor, the Rev. George Mayer, and those who were our members during those early years. Roy, George, and I have each had strengths as well as areas for growth in the ways we have led this congregation; but the grace of God is such that it uses our strengths for the work of ministry and mission and doesn't worry too much about the deficits. Not one of us was or is perfect, but we were good enough to do the work to which we have been called. And that rule doesn't hold just for clergy, but laity as well. Whatever we lack, God makes up the difference: such is the way of God's amazing grace; such is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Something else I need to say is that our celebration today is not about me: it is about you as the people of God in Christ Jesus, the people of God known as the congregation of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, Waterloo and how, together, we have contributed to (dare I say it?) twenty years of grace. Someone congratulated me recently on having been able to last twenty years in one parish: without hesitation, I said, "The people of Christ, Waterloo, are very good to their pastors: we have only had three pastors over the past 47 years! When you think about it, that is a comment not on the three pastors, but on the congregation itself." And it is true. I would not change places with any pastor in our synod. What we have been able to be for one another throughout the past twenty years, the work God has accomplished through us, reveals nothing less than Christ has been with us "on the roadway" of our life together, but also leading us, guiding us, protecting us in the power of the Holy Spirit. Many of you have been called into membership in this congregation since May 1, 1994. Your call to this community and the gifts you have brought and shared as co-workers with us in our work of blessing are evidence that God's Spirit is busy here. Your incorporation into this community is identifiable as just a small measure of the radical welcome we recognize as one of the chief marks of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can never take it for granted, because there are still people who come to worship here who do not feel welcome, but for the most part, we remember who we are as those who are called to welcome more and more people into the circle of God's blessing in Christ Jesus.

I don't mind telling you that I love the perspective that twenty years allows; I love being able to confirm children I have baptized; I love being able to preside at the weddings of youth I have confirmed; I love baptizing the children of those I have married; I love remembering those who were here before I came and who have left us a legacy of love and service that we can do nothing less than honour through prayers of gratitude; I love the happy memories of good times; I grieve the times when we have hurt one another; I mourn the dear ones we have lost.

The road we have walked has had some interesting turns: we have had some mountaintop experience and some deep valley experiences. But we have never stopped, nor must we ever stop. In Christ Jesus, after whom this congregation is named, we are always being born anew through the living and enduring word of God. And God's counsel to us this day through that living and enduring word is to remember that we are not alone on the long and winding road of discipleship, ministry, and service. We have been joined by the Risen Christ who continues to walk with us and is known to us in the breaking of the bread.

On behalf of Paula, Graham, Christopher, and myself, thank you for all your love and support over these past twenty years. God bless each and every one of you.