

MYSTICAL AND MISSIONAL

Easter 3 – Year B: Luke 24:36-48

When I was interviewed in 1994 to become pastor of this congregation, the hot-button issue was weekly Communion. I knew that it was a test question in my discussion with the Call Committee, but also much more. My predecessor, the Rev. George Mayer, had introduced the weekly celebration of Holy Communion to our congregation two months before his resignation became effective. I knew that even those who were in support of moving from twice monthly to weekly Communion felt a little more preparation would have been in order. George, on the other hand, knew exactly what he was doing by placing weekly Communion on the congregational agenda: among other things, the Call Committee would have a question to ask candidates that was theological, political, and contextual. How the candidates responded to the question would say much about their leadership style and provide an opportunity for self-disclosure on the issue.

My answer, for the record, acknowledged that the process George used in moving the congregation to weekly Communion was unusual and would have felt unfair, especially to those who had a contrary opinion on the question. But then I mentioned a memorial each congregation had received from our then-Eastern Canada Synod in convention in 1982, urging each parish to move to more frequent celebration of Holy Communion, with an aim to having Holy Communion as the chief liturgy each Sunday. I suggested to the Call Committee that perhaps it was time to take seriously this 12-year-old memo. I did show my hand, and told them that I was in favour of weekly Communion, but I also ventured that it would be impossible to understand how well the weekly celebration of Holy Communion sat spiritually with the people of Christ, Waterloo, without trying it. I suggested that a trial period of a year was reasonable, and that an evaluation would be appropriate at the end of a year.

To make a long story short, I received the Call as pastor and we embarked together on a one-year trial of celebrating Holy Communion together each Sunday. Interestingly, the evaluation never took place! Before the end of the year's trial, most of those who had been most opposed to the quick switch in November 1993, spoke to me informally and said that they understood what I had meant by suggesting in a Sunday sermon that worship without Holy Communion was incomplete. One of the converts said to me, "I don't want to go back to a service without Communion: I would miss it!"

What I *learned*, not only in the one-year trial period, but through all my time here as pastor is how the *proclamation* of Holy Communion forms us as a community of disciples. Most of the members of Christ Church over the years have spent some time with Luther's *Small Catechism*, if not as confirmands when they were in Grades 7, 8, and 9, then later in Adult Membership classes as they studied Lutheran doctrine. Among other things, Luther taught in the *Small Catechism* that the Sacrament of Holy Communion proclaims the real presence of Christ to the gathered community; so that, just as Christ was truly present with the disciples and their companions in the account we read this morning from Luke's gospel, so Christ is truly present with us when we are gathered to celebrate Holy Communion. The words, "the body of Christ, given for you" and "the blood of Christ, shed for you" said to each communicant as the bread and wine are administered, has its way with us over time. Word and ritual form us (or perhaps reform us!) from worshippers to disciples! We know [as Luther writes] that the "bread remains bread and the wine remains wine," but it is faith, nurtured by Word and ritual/Word and Sacrament that gives assent to his explanation that "in, with, and under the forms of bread and wine, Christ is truly present." And what is mystical about all this formation is that whenever we read from the gospels, we are hard pressed to argue against our being the present-day disciples of Jesus. In the stories of Jesus, we identify most easily with the first disciples; we find ourselves in their words and actions. In today's Gospel, without a huge leap of the imagination, we can take our place in that first-century house in Jerusalem where Christ was truly present on the day of his resurrection, because what they did 2,000 years ago in celebrating Christ's real presence and what we do each Sunday are not that different.

Lutherans don't talk easily about the mystical. We tend to be a very practical lot with all of our beliefs contained in a neat-and-tidy book called the *Augsburg Confession*, holding, among other things, both the *Small* and *Large Catechism*. As some of you know, I serve on the Liturgy Task Force of the Anglican Church of Canada, and spent the better part of an hour at one of our meetings trying to contain myself as all the Anglicans in the room talked about surveying their members on the meaning of Holy Communion.

At the end of the hour, with a big grin on my face, I told them how interesting I had found the discussion, since Lutherans could never have such a debate. Most of the people around the table knew immediately what I was saying: because the Lutheran Church is a Confessional Church, Lutherans know exactly what Holy Communion means. Martin Luther wrote it down for us in the *Small Catechism*. Not only that, some of us know his *Small Catechism* by heart – one of the requirements of being confirmed a Lutheran in years gone by. The Anglicans in the room were amused that someone who sat so comfortably at their table could be so far removed from their reality.

The down-side for Lutherans of not having such free-range discussions on the Eucharist, however, may be our hesitancy to name some of the coordinates of our faith as mystical, Christ's real presence in the bread and cup of Holy Communion, for example. It is for this reason that I have such an appreciation for this morning's Gospel – and what comes before.

Immediately before Jesus appears to the eleven "and their companions" in the house in Jerusalem, Luke gives us the account of Jesus' joining a disciple named Cleopas and his companion (perhaps his wife?) on the road to Emmaus in the latter part of the afternoon on the first Easter. Jesus walks with them to the house they share in Emmaus. The two have no idea that it is Jesus who is with them, but as they walk toward Emmaus, the stranger (Jesus) interprets Hebrew scripture for them suggesting the fulfillment of many passages in the birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of their teacher. Later, they will exclaim, "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 sang this text as our Gospel Acclamation today.)

The two persuade Jesus to join them for supper at their house in Emmaus, even though they still do not recognize him. When he sits down at the table with them, however, prays the evening blessing and breaks the bread, they instantly recognize him. Luke tells us that there was nothing up until that point that identified Jesus for Cleopas and his friend, but in the breaking of the bread, they were immediately taken back in memory to the meal they shared with Jesus in Jerusalem on the night when he was handed over to chief priests and the officers of the temple police. It was instant recognition, and then, according to Luke, it was all over! Luke writes, "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." The mystical in this account is not Jesus' vanishing, but the two disciples' recognizing him in the breaking of the bread.

Today's Gospel follows immediately on the heels on the Emmaus story. Cleopas and his companion run back to Jerusalem to the house in which the eleven and their companions are held up and tell of how Jesus was made known to them "in the breaking of the bread."

The second account, today's Gospel, also has Jesus opening their minds to understand the Hebrew scriptures in light of Jesus' birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. But there is nothing ephemeral in this visit: quite the opposite in fact! Luke doesn't say anything about how Jesus entered the house in today's account, but he does have Jesus greet the disciples with the words, "Peace be with you!" Unlike the Emmaus disciples, the Jerusalem disciples have no trouble identifying Jesus, but they do have trouble believing what they see is real. In this account, they are variously "startled and terrified," "frightened and doubting," "disbelieving and still wondering." Again, the mystical in this narrative is not Jesus' sudden appearance or even the disciples' disbelief, but rather the fact of Jesus' real presence among them. "Touch me and see," he invites. Carefully, deliberately, he shows them his hands and his feet. Then he asks them for something to eat; they give him a piece of broiled fish, he takes it, and he eats it while they all watch. It is unbelievable to them that any of this is happening, but it is. And then, without even hesitating – perhaps he still has food in his mouth – Jesus tells them that they are *witnesses!* In other words, they are now entrusted with the story, *his* story in all its fullness! He makes reference to the central message of the mission they have shared, "repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name" but also, they are *witnesses* of his death and his resurrection, *witnesses* of everything they have seen, experienced, understood, misunderstood, failed at, done successfully, and eventually recognized for what it was – God's coming near! The whole of their discipleship is now the story; *their* story, Jesus tells them in so many words, is the final authority! And then he tells them to take it to the streets, beginning right where they are in Jerusalem!

I said earlier that Lutherans don't talk easily about the mystical: there is an exception; and again the exception finds its roots in these stories. As Jesus explains what is happening/what has just happened in his being raised up and commissioning his disciples as *witnesses*, that *they* are now his story, we can see

the origin of the community of disciples being what we still call “the mystical body of Christ” in the world. The disciples of Jesus, those to whom the good news of Jesus Christ has been entrusted, even the Lutheran disciples, are the mystical body of Christ. And what was mystical before, the breaking of the bread and Christ’s real presence, remain mystical and powerful in our midst. Christians are an *Easter people*, because of our perpetual celebration of Holy Communion with the risen Christ. We are *witnesses* because we become the story of Jesus Christ for our time and place! We are both mystical and missional.

Dithering is not an option for the disciples of Jesus. George had it right! Debating the pros and cons of weekly Communion gets us nowhere. We are to engage, connect, get as close as we can to the primary experience of discipleship, and then take our faith to the streets, as Jesus did, to save and to heal the world which, our Hymn of the Day reminds us, is “still in pain.” Our Prayer of the Day on this third Sunday of Easter could not be a better summary of our call to be both mystical and missional disciples.

Wounded God,
disabled and divine:
give us faith to perceive you
pierced and embodied,
standing here among us,
feeding us forgiveness,
beautifully broken;
through Christ, the suffering servant. Amen.