

Jesus had stirred a lot of people up – from those who were his close friends to those who had heard him only at a distance – those who'd been healed by him and those who'd felt threatened by him. Those who'd known him throughout his ministry and those who'd only just discovered him. Jesus had stirred them all up. Because in him, many of them had seen a new way – an exciting new way – that awoke within their dry, parched souls a tender, moist shoot of new hope. But now he was dead. Dead and buried. And each person who'd been touched by Jesus was lost in their own pain.

Two of those in pain were Cleopas and his companion, who were walking down the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. A seven mile walk takes a while, so they had some time to share everything that they had been experiencing over the past few days. And as they were sharing, a stranger came up alongside them and asked them what they were talking about. Since the man was obviously also leaving Jerusalem, Cleopas responded, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” And they shared with him all they had seen and felt and hoped. “We had hoped the he was the one to redeem Israel” they said. But then they also shared the unbelievable news that some of the women had said that an angel had told them that Jesus was not dead, but alive. With doubts competing with their hopes, I imagine them being almost shell shocked from all these sad and strange events. But this stranger did not back away politely and leave them to their own pain and confusion, but instead, stayed with them, engaged with them, and reminded them of the stories of their faith, from Moses right through all the prophets.

His teaching set their hearts burning within them. So as they were getting close to their destination, they were hesitant to let the man go on. “Stay with us,” they said, “It's almost dark.” And he agreed to stay. The three of them then sat down to share a meal together, and when the stranger took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, suddenly, the gospel says, their eyes were opened, and they saw that the man was not a stranger at all, but Jesus himself, sitting right there eating with them. They got only one clear glimpse, and then he vanished. But that glimpse was enough for them to be completely convinced that Jesus had indeed arisen. It must have been completely dark by then, but even so they got up that very hour and went the seven miles back to Jerusalem to find the disciples, who were gathered together sharing their own resurrection stories. No longer separate and lost in their own pain, they were received by the community of faith, to celebrate as one body their unique yet common awakening to Christ's enduring presence in their lives.

It is a wonderful thing to feel that we belong to something larger than ourselves – that we are part of a joyful and like-minded community that is bound together by a common experience, vision and hope. But so much of our lives are usually spent suffering alone in our own private pain – or lost somewhere in the struggle between doubt and hope. And so we spend a lot of time and energy searching – searching for our own answers, searching for relief, searching for...something – and often feeling like we never find what we're looking for.

But like the men on the road to Emmaus, I think sometimes our hearts know we've found something important well before our minds catch up with what's going on. I often see this happening right here when someone will show up at a Sunday service saying, “I don't know, but for some reason, something just told me to come in here today.” Or someone will find themselves moved to tears by a liturgy and not have any idea why they are crying. Or there are the people who would never think to come here on Sunday morning, but come midweek on their lunch hour to just sit in this quiet room, and to find a comfort and solace that is beyond words.

Like the two on the road to Emmaus, our hearts are burning for the transforming presence of Christ. But while our hearts burn, our minds are still full of questions. Was that man on the road really Jesus? If so, how could they not have recognized him right off? Was he somehow disguised? Or was he really some stranger, *through* which Cleopas and his friend somehow again saw Christ? But if he'd been a real person – Jesus or someone else – how could he have disappeared the moment they recognized him? Was he ever really there, or was this some kind of spiritual vision? These are all good questions, none of which we can ever answer fully in a left brained kind of way. So

many of us, rather than wrestling with the gray areas that come up, let many of our own potential answers remain strangers to us.

But for the sake of having a mature and life giving faith, it is important for each of us to work our questions out – to inquire, explore, discuss, chew on, ponder and digest. This is different than the expansive kind of energy that seeks ever new questions. It's a more tenacious kind of energy – one that stubbornly looks for answers to questions that have no clear answers. And as we expend this tenacious and focused energy, we're being called to share our wrestlings with each other rather than remaining lost in our own private confusions. For the body of Christ is all about what we share, not what we keep to ourselves.

Christ is right here with us and among us and between us this very moment, but ironically, Christ is often inviting us most strongly through those places that are strangers to us – those things or people we keep at arms length – those areas where we choose not to get too involved or not to ask too many questions or not to risk ourselves too much or go out too far on a limb.

In the story of the men on the road to Emmaus I hear a call to stop allowing the stranger to remain a stranger – whether it's that new person over there you haven't met yet – or the guy that always sits in front of you but whose name you've never quite caught. Or maybe it's even the woman over there that you've known and chatted with for years, but you don't ever get past much more than small talk. Or maybe one of your strangers is the Bible – that huge, hard to read book you never really learned much about and confuses you more than illuminates you when you try to tackle it on your own. Maybe the stranger is the creed, with those outlandish statements that you find so hard to swallow. Or maybe the stranger is the church as an institution – with all its human and institutional failings. Where are your strangers here in this place? Perhaps a personal experience of the risen Christ is waiting for you exactly there.

Simon Peter was one of the first few people to witness the risen Christ. In his letter that we read this morning, he wrote that the logical response to receiving the awareness of Christ's eternal presence is to "love one another deeply from the heart." How lovely. And after all, Jesus calls us to love one another as he loved us. These sweet sounding phrases can make us feel really good. But maybe we keep even them at arm's length – kind of like strangers – because our hearts already know that to really follow that call to radical love may mean some significant re-ordering of our lives and priorities. But in opening ourselves up to that stranger, we may also discover ways to live more and more deeply into what we already are: a joyful and like-minded community, bound together by a common experience, vision and hope.

It may take honest openness with each other, a little more study of the Bible, acquiring a little more knowledge of history, or a clearer understanding of tradition. In other words, it will take engagement and sharing – and yes – energy and commitment to deepen and grow. But whether our minds have caught up with our hearts yet on this or not, that's what we're all here for. To break bread, to re-member Christ, and to share everything we are and everything we have in community as fellow seekers, fellow Christians on the way. We are here to discover Christ – among us, within us and between us, and then to pour ourselves out of this door every Sunday to spread the gospel of Christ's healing love out into the world.