

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church
Third Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2017
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THE MYSTERY OF EASTER

Hosea 6:1–3
Luke 24:13–35

John Dominic Crossan in his insightful book, *Who Killed Jesus?*, invites us to see the story of the Emmaus Road as a resurrection story that belongs not to the named disciples of Jesus but to the larger community of the early Christians. In fact, the named disciples (following the death of Judas, there are only eleven of them) are nowhere to be seen in the story itself. They are brought in at the very end, as a kind of addendum. It is as though the storyteller seems compelled to make mention of them in some way. The story itself centers around two followers of Jesus, one named Cleopas and the other who is nameless, who encounter the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. The nameless disciple may have been a woman, or even the wife of Cleopas. (Perhaps we are to see ourselves as the nameless disciple?) The fact that one of the disciples is nameless only reinforces the idea that this story in truth does belong to the larger community of early Christians, many of whom we will never know by name.

Confused by the recent happenings in Jerusalem and the story of the women who find the empty tomb, the two followers on the road to Emmaus are filled with wonderment. The stranger who walks with them chides them just a little and then begins to explain all these happenings by interpreting portions of the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is nightfall. The stranger appears to be walking ahead of them as if he were going beyond the village of Emmaus. The two followers invite him to stay with them. He does so, and then is revealed to them as the risen Jesus as he blesses and breaks the bread.

We might ask: why did the two disciples not recognize the stranger who joined them on the road to Emmaus as the risen Jesus? Perhaps it is because the resurrection introduces something completely new into the life of the world. Even the appearance of Jesus has been altered. Or, an explanation that I like even better, one suggested by Steven at our

Wednesday study, is that there is a difference between seeing someone and recognizing someone. To truly recognize someone is to invite that person into our lives, as the two disciples did when they later invite the stranger to have supper with them. To recognize someone is to share life with that person as we do when we eat with someone. It is as the two disciples invite Jesus into their presence and break bread with him that they recognize him as the risen Christ. Seeing is transformed into recognition.

John Dominic Crossan suggests that this story reveals the life of the early Christian community. In the story, Jesus spends time interpreting to the two followers portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, and then sharing bread and wine. This is exactly what the early Christian community did. It spent its time engaged in the interpretation of the scriptures and in the Eucharistic meal, in the breaking of the bread. The early Christian community needed to make sense of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so they searched the scriptures, and in the Hebrew Scriptures they were able to find a framework of meaning, which they then applied to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In searching the scriptures, they encountered the servant songs of Isaiah and saw Jesus in them. They remembered Psalm 22 and began to imagine what Jesus said on the cross, including the words of that psalm that read: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” They read the words of the prophet Hosea we heard this morning and they saw in them God’s vindication of the One called Jesus who had been put to death unjustly.

*“Come, let us return to God;
for it is God who has torn, and God will heal us;
God has struck down, and God will bind us up.
After two days God will revive us;
on the third day God will raise us up,
so that we may live before God.*

—Hosea 6:1-2

The early followers of Jesus came to understand that the One who had called them into discipleship could not be defeated by death. After three days, God raised him up, and raised them to new life and hope as well. Just as Jesus could not be silenced by death, so the movement he had initiated could not be stopped. In the resurrection, both Jesus and the movement he initiated were brought to newness of life. The resurrection of Jesus meant the resurrection of the movement’s community as well.

Perhaps, when we think, mistakenly, that we have said all that we can say about Easter, perhaps the greatest mystery of Easter of all is that the movement begun by Jesus could not be defeated. This is the fact that seemed to be most important to the historical observers of the first centuries of the Christian movement. Writes Josephus, the sympathetic Jewish historian of the time:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man.
 . . . For he was one who wrought surprising feats
 and was a teacher of such people as accepted the
 truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many
 of the Greeks. . . . When Pilate, upon hearing him
 accused by men of the highest standing amongst
 us, had condemned him to be crucified, those
 who had in the first time come to love him did
 not give up their affection for him. . . . And the
 tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has
 still to this day not disappeared.

—*Jewish Antiquities* 18:63

The Roman historian Tacitus, not sympathetic to the followers of Christ, likened the early Christian movement as a “disease” that could not be stopped. (*Annals* 15:44)

There are three points to be made, says John Dominic Crossan.
“There was a movement. The authorities executed the founder. But the movement continued and spread.” Perhaps this is the true mystery of Easter.

The movement did not belong to the twelve disciples, reduced to eleven. Only later did Peter and the named disciples take control of the movement. In the beginning the movement belonged to the larger community of followers of which Cleopas and the other nameless person are representative.

It is a fact of history that the movement begun by Jesus became an establishment, first when the leadership became centralized in the named male disciples instead of in the community as a whole, and secondly, most decisively, when Emperor Constantine named Christianity the established religion of the Roman Empire.

It was, however, in the beginning, not an establishment. It was not even a Jesus movement. It was, as Crossan says, a “Kingdom Movement.” Jesus did not send out disciples so that they would speak about himself or bring others to him. He simply sent them out to do as he was doing. They went out to heal one another, share their food together, preach the good news of peace, and thereby bring the Kingdom into the midst of their world. Unlike Caesar, whose kingdom dominated people, God’s kingdom, or realm, sought to empower people. That is why the Kingdom Movement could not be stopped.

When Christianity became an established religion, it lost its edge, so to speak. Can you imagine a Tacitus in our day calling the Christian faith a “disease?” Hardly. In its cultural establishment in the new world it became the darling of the American Empire. It still is with those in power who use it for their own purposes.

There are churches, however, who no longer belong to the American cultural establishment, thanks be to God. Our church is one of them. The fact that we have been moved to the periphery of our society is a blessing, an opportunity, for we are now free to get in touch once again with the Kingdom Movement begun in the name of Jesus. We are free to do as Jesus did: heal the sick, welcome the stranger, do justice, preach the good news of peace, and share the food of our table with all.

However, let’s not fool ourselves. We still carry the vestiges of establishment. We are still subject to the care of church property, to the tasks of administration, to the maintaining of a budget. These seem to be far removed from the story of the Emmaus Road. However, perhaps, now that we are in a real sense no longer a part of America’s cultural establishment, we can at least see ourselves as a community located somewhere between establishment and movement. The movement part of our church’s ethos is the important ingredient in our life together. Seeing ourselves as part of a movement is the one thing that will keep us alive and vital as a community of faith. It is the one thing that will allow us to participate in the Kingdom Movement founded by Jesus, to do as Jesus did, to love God and neighbor, to care for the needs of the world and the creation itself, indeed to live the new life of the resurrection. This we will do. Thanks be to God. Amen.