

Luke's Gospel begins with a birth narrative. Jesus is eight days old, and taken to be dedicated in the Temple. It's here, we meet a remarkable pair: Anna and Simeon. We're told that Simeon is a righteous man, and that the Holy Spirit rests on him. He's advanced in age, but the Spirit has told him that he will see the Lord's Messiah in his lifetime. Anna is a prophetess. I hope that word catches your attention. Prophetess categorizes her with the likes of Miriam and Deborah, which means she's someone you'd better listen to. She spends all day and night in the temple. And the text doesn't need to tell us that the Holy Spirit rests on her, too – trust me, it does!!!

At the very moment Anna and Simeon see Jesus, they recognize God's Messiah in their presence. Here, in this child, is someone who will be a light, one who will illumine and reveal God's purposes to both Jews and Gentiles alike. God's redemption, God's salvation of Jerusalem is at hand, for here is one who will be able to distribute the Holy Spirit on both a macro and a micro level.

Luke's Gospel ends with a traveling narrative. On the afternoon of that first Easter, two followers of Jesus, Cleopas among them, who know the eleven well, are making their way back to the village of Emmaus, a suburb of Jerusalem. The walking partners are struggling to make sense of the Passover Week events. As they converse, they are joined by a stranger, the resurrected Jesus. Jesus prevents their recognition of him, and asks them to tell him of the week's events.

Now I imagine these men are a bit younger than Anna and Simeon, so they don't have some of the wisdom that comes with age. But unlike, their elder counterparts, the two travelers have extensive knowledge and familiarity of Jesus. They know he's a prophet. They've been in community with him. They've sought to be his disciple. Still, even with all that exposure and familiarity, they don't know Jesus like Anna and Simeon do; they don't yet view him through the lenses of the Spirit.

More than anything, the two men, as well as the disciples, have pictured what Jesus' Messiahship will be; they've imagined what a restored Jerusalem will look like. And for them, they don't expect this Jerusalem to come with a humiliating death, a heavy grief, and the injustices of Rome right outside their doors. It's been three days, and they expect a heroic warrior to topple the current system,

and restore the glories of David's Israel, tales of which excited them in childhood. And to add insult to injury, Mary, and some other women of their group, have reported an empty tomb, and they have seen visions of their teacher. But when Peter, and a few other men went to see for themselves, they only saw the empty tomb – Jesus didn't appear for them.

Jesus is listening to two witnesses to his ministry that are not yet able to process what they've seen.

At this point in the story, I imagine Jesus, patient as he is, wants to shake some sense or some spirit into his neophytes. "How many signs do you need? I'm standing right before you. And I appeared to Mary, because unlike each of you men, she has shown initiative. She was up and at 'em at dawn, while you were still sleeping."

But Jesus doesn't shake 'em, even if they are overcooking his grits. That's kind of one of the things that makes Jesus, Jesus. Instead, Jesus goes into teaching mode. He implores his new friends to remember the whole arc of the scriptures. He recounts the stories of the prophets from Moses on through the ages. He reminds them of all the things that God's servants must endure, that's the joy, and the pain, and the suffering, and all the experiences of life, in order to fulfill the glory that will follow.

And it's like time stops. The disciples drink up his teachings, so much so that they hardly notice they've walked seven miles. It's like they've swallowed a good novel – the words have their full attention. They are all that matters.

The three walkers arrive in Emmaus at suppertime. Cleopas and his companion invite their new friend to join them for dinner. At the table, Jesus takes, breaks, and blesses bread, three motions similar to what he did at Passover, and in the miracle of feeding the five thousand.

And here's what I think is really interesting about today's text. There are so many similarities to other Easter witness stories.

On Easter morning, our text told us that Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus at the precise moment he calls her name. In some way, Jesus' naming of Mary is an assertion of her inherent value, as well as a catalyst in evoking her deep connection to him. Hearing God call her name is Mary's resurrection moment.

Last week, even though it wasn't the text we preached, John's Gospel recounted the story of Thomas. I'm speculating here, but I imagine Thomas was a hugger, or at least a hand-shaker. What I mean to say, is that I think Thomas felt a kindred connection to Jesus and the others in the sharing of physical space and touch. And that resonates with me in this age of Corona, because I like to hug the people I love, too. And Thomas isn't gonna believe, or perhaps experience belief, until he sees, hears, and touches Jesus for himself. When Jesus invites him to touch his hands and his sides, Thomas replies, "My Lord and My God!"

This week, it's not the hearing, seeing, or touching of Jesus, nor is it the fulfillment of prophecy that evokes images of resurrection for Cleopas and his companion. Instead, it's the sharing of a meal. When Jesus breaks the bread, looks his friends in the eyes, and says, "Hey, y'all, I'm glad you are at the table with me," they are instantly reconnected to his spirit of hospitality. When we gather in Christ's name, acting with the same sense of love and generosity he offered others, when we allow ourselves to be both host and guest at any table, Jesus is present.

Finally, I don't think the last few sentences of today's text should be overlooked. The very moment Cleopas and his friend experience the resurrected Jesus, they leave to share the good news with others. This is in keeping with Mary, who ran with joy to tell the others, and with Thomas, whom tradition tells us was the first person to share the story of Jesus in India. And later that evening, when Cleopas and his companion finally rendezvous with the disciples and others in Jerusalem, they learn that Jesus has appeared to Peter as well.

I know, I know, our lection is supposed to be one story, today's story, and here I've gone and told you about six different experiences of people encountering and recognizing Jesus as Messiah, that one who will resurrect, redeem, and restore the lives of God's people.

But you see, that's the thing. All of these stories are connected. To one another. And to us.

Yes, of course, our individual encounters with the resurrected Christ are important. We are all unique, and therefore we experience, encounter and process our connections with Jesus in very different ways. But when we share with one another the varied and unique ways in which Jesus appears, we offer a greater accessibility for all of God's creatures to encounter their own sense of resurrection in the story of Jesus.

Maybe you feel invisible. Perhaps Jesus will call your name.

Maybe you feel isolated, cut off. Perhaps Jesus will offer you an embrace.

Maybe you need space at a table. Perhaps Jesus will break some bread with you.

Maybe, in the presence of Jesus, you see God's realm bursting into Caesar's, and you've just got to tell others how that feels.

I think that sometimes we get too caught up in the mechanics of the Easter story. We turn ourselves inside-out trying to reckon how we might react to seeing the risen Christ fresh out of the tomb. In so doing, we lose sight of what this mysterious transformation really does...Somehow, somehow, the spirit, the substance of God, made known in Jesus, is something that can also be revealed in each of us.

And my mind drifts back to Anna and Simeon, because I have a hunch, that when they saw the baby Jesus, they were seeing more than a child, and more than the life of a man, and more than a political restoration. I think they were seeing forward into the days where the spirit would take hold of an entire city.

This morning, in this text, we're witnessing the beginning of a metamorphosis. The inner circle now believes, and they are sharing revelations of belief, steeped in spirit, with one another. Over the next 40 days, Jesus will equip them to receive the Holy Spirit in a more formal way. And on the Day of Pentecost, an entire city,

speaking in a thousand tongues, and whirling with the flames and winds of God's Spirit, will birth a new kind of resurrection: the Church.

If we are to honor such a resurrection, I think it means making Sardis Baptist Church a place where hearing your name, embracing your friends, breaking bread together, and sharing our witness of God's presence are all catalysts for revealing a living, transformative God, for all those who still feel like they are living out the darkness, finality, and tragedy of Friday and Saturday.

Anna and Simeon; Mary and Thomas, Cleopas, and an associate, Peter, and others whose names we do not know, discovered the resurrected Jesus by resurrecting the very things Jesus did to give them hope: they embraced his presence; they looked into the hearts of their friends; they called people by their names; they discerned the scriptures with one another, gleaning insight from everyone's perspective; they broke bread with one another; they told truth – good, needed truth – about how encounters with the risen Christ had transformed their very beings. But more than anything, they gathered together, nurturing a Spirit that lives on in every age, be it one of occupation, renaissance, prosperity, or uncertainty.

And if we are really paying attention today, Luke's gospel, and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, are still being written, right here in this place by women and men who seek to follow the One who gives us life.

Friends, may God continue to give us the resolve to gather in community, however creatively, in order that we too may seek and find God's transforming, resurrecting, everlasting Spirit.

Amen.