

SERMON ~ April 11, 2021 ~ Luke 24: Emmaus
A Parable about First-Century Worship
The Rev. Rose Ann Vita at First United Church, Waterloo

INTRODUCTION

I am appreciative of working with a worship committee that is engaged in finding ways for our time together this morning to be meaningful in adaptive ways. You may have noticed that . . . "*I am not Rev. Harry*" . . . meaning that the Search Team selected both of us knowing we had different styles, so that you might have a broader experience of the scope of worship. People have different ways of knowing about God and having a variety of styles of worship makes the experience of this hour to be an hour of grace more accessible.

Today I would like to talk about my style. As many of you may know, I served as an ordained Lutheran minister in the States before coming to Canada and was ordained to Word and Sacrament. Preaching was an essential part of worship and every Sunday we remembered our Baptism and celebrated the Eucharist --- communion. The Lutheran denomination was a first-generation offshoot of the Roman Catholic Church and it followed the same Order of Worship as the Catholic church, as did the Anglicans and most Presbyterians. As denominations branched further away from the Roman Catholic Church, the style and shape of their worship services departed from the Catholic pattern of worship.

Today I want to talk about the tradition in which I was trained.

A worship service has five main parts:

- The Gathering
- The Word
- The Offering
- The Meal
- The Sending

This shape is based on the pattern of worship in the Bible. There are accounts in scripture, both in the Hebrew and the New Testament, where when people gathered to worship God, they gathered, listened, brought their offerings, ate a meal, and went out to share what they had received.

Today's *Story of the Road to Emmaus* follows the same pattern. The followers of Jesus were together on the road, a "stranger" explained the scriptures to them, they offered the stranger hospitality, they ate a meal together and as the stranger broke the bread, they recognized the Risen Christ. Then they went to tell others of their experience.

Many theologians wonder if the Emmaus story was an actual event or if it was a metaphor or allegory, even a parable if you wish, of how the early *Followers of the Way* (that is what they were called) experienced the presence of the Risen Christ.

Marcus Borg, a modern-day theologian, expresses this thinking in this way:

"I am **not** sure that it **happened** this **way** or **not**
but I know that this story is **true**."

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Before I confuse you more, let's look at today's scripture and see it "*again for the first time*" --- another phrase attributed to Marcus Borg. Each part of the sermon will be presented in three parts:

- the text,
- the first-century context, and
- the twenty-first century context.

Part 1. WE ARE GATHERED

THE TEXT

"Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

THE FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

In the first century, the followers of Jesus identified themselves as belonging to Israel. They were trying to understand Jesus as a fulfilment of their Jewish faith tradition. They were known as *Followers of the Way*.

As good Jews, they went to synagogue, kept Sabbath on Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, and worked the rest of the week. On Sunday evenings, after work, they would gather at someone's home, probably in the open courtyard that was in the middle of the household, and they would talk about their day and the evening meal was being prepared. Even the reference in the text to "seven miles" would have been a clue to Sabbath and Sunday.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

We have a hymn in *More Voices*:

*"Where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there, I am there."*

Can you see the similarities between the text, the first-century context and our worship? We believe that we are gathered by God's Holy Spirit to be together for worship. Often, we meet one another on our way into the building: in fact, intentional churches have hospitality teams and greeters in their parking lot to ensure that first time guests feel welcome. We engage in "how are you?" conversations and we catch-up with one

another as we enter the sanctuary, the space where the worship event takes place. Often worship begins with a prelude . . . a musical welcome . . . and an official greeting and announcements. There might be an introit --- a musical call to worship ---or a spoken call to worship, an opening prayer, and an opening hymn. Sometimes there is a time of confession, a time to remember our failings and hear words of forgiveness. **We have been gathered.**

Part 2. WE LISTEN TO SCRIPTURE AND ITS INTERPRETATION

THE TEXT

"Then the stranger said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."

THE FIRST-CENTURY CONTEXT

Jews were required to do mitzvah, good work. They were required to study and wrestle with the Torah on Sabbath together. (The Torah, their sacred writings and commentaries of the Rabbis). On Sunday evenings, these early *Followers of the Way* would compare and contrast what they studied in the Torah on Saturday with the teachings and stories of Jesus. Their being actively involved in wrestling with their sacred stories and its interpretation was a way of life for them.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

During the "Listening" part of worship, we hear scripture read to us from a pulpit. Traditionally there are several readings, one from the Hebrew Testament, one from the Psalms, another from the Letters of Paul or the Apostles, and one from the Gospel accounts. This hearing is followed by an inspired interpretation from "the theologian-in-residence" . . . (ha!) the preacher . . . someone who has studied the ancient languages of Greek and Hebrew in order to faithfully interpret the scriptures and deliver a message to those who are gathered that is relevant to current day living. A hymn that reflects the highlighted topic often follows.

Part 3. WE OFFER OUR GIFTS

THE TEXT

"As they came near the village to which they were going, the stranger walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening, and the day is now nearly over." So, he went in to stay with them."

THE FIRST-CENTURY CONTEXT

Hospitality is another mitzvah. It was customary to ensure that sojourners were safe. Travellers were offered a place to stay for the night. And on the Sabbath, a candle was placed in a window to indicate, "Stay with us, it is almost evening." Their understanding was that as God has provided shelter for them, they were to provide for others.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

Here in the service is where we have the opportunity to offer our gifts . . . a response to the blessings that we have received, especially to the inspiration and grace that has come to us in the hearing of the Word. We give a financial offering to support the ministry of the local and national church and any mission and outreach activities connected with the congregation. Our offerings also support building expenses so that there is a place for worship and to host our various ministries, and also a place for support groups. Here is when we pray for ourselves, others, and our world.

Part 4. WE RECEIVE COMMUNION

THE TEXT

"When the stranger was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

THE FIRST-CENTURY CONTEXT

Scholars are discovering that the sharing a meal was a central activity of these early gatherings of the followers. It seemed they always met around a meal, not necessarily communion, but a real, full-fledge meal . . . after all they were gathering after a day's work. This essential element -- the meal -- disappeared in the second century . . . as the Jesus' movement became organized into a formal "institution," communion (the recitation of the words of institution over a piece of bread and a cup of wine) became the norm. Often only the celebrant received communion, not those in attendance. Scholars are still puzzled why the meal disappeared.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

As stated earlier, the denominations that are more closely related to the Roman Catholic Church maintain "the meal" as weekly communion (words said over a piece of bread and a cup of wine or fruit juice) But some denominations maintain the actual meal as a part of their Sunday practice, and even obligation. They have Sunday lunches and suppers in the church building bookending prayer services and Bible studies. And churches like our church, often include weekly coffee time and an occasional potluck lunch on Sundays, although it is a "nice but not necessary" addition to worship time.

I wonder if our eyes are open when we break bread . . . or share a piece of cake . . . together. I wonder if we experience transcendence over our coffee time conversations. I wonder if our words heart-felt and revealing of the mystery of Christ's presence amongst us. I often wonder . . .

Part 5. WE ARE SENT OUT

THE TEXT

"That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

THE FIRST-CENTURY CONTEXT

After the early followers met and ate, they took food to those who were not able to be with them, especially to the widows and orphans. This custom was part of their long Hebrew heritage. Portions were always brought to those in need.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

It has been said that:

"Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

This part of worship is often where the comparison between the first and twenty-first centuries falls apart. Do we get up and go out and tell others what has happened to us?

These first-century followers of Jesus were like grandparents with a new grandchild, showing pictures of their new grandchild to anyone foolish to show interest. These followers were like newly engaged lovers sending "*save the date*" announcements. Or like a lottery winner bursting with joy and excitement about the hope for a new beginning, new possibilities, a new life.

What is it about us? Are not our hearts burning within us? Are we not enlightened and overwhelmed with joy? Does anything happen to us during worship? Are we even open to the possibility of being ecstatic?

Or are we just being Canadian?

Maybe we should strive to be more Christian and less Canadian . . . more open to that experiencing that "*joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts*" . . . eh?

Amen