



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Easter 3 (A)

#### **Making Meaning Out of Mystery**

**[RCL] Acts 2:14a,36-41; Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35**

When strange things happen, what do you do? When hard things happen, to whom do you turn? There is so much in the world and in the human experience that is confusing, troubling, or concerning, and we each have different tools and habits to get through conundrums. When life's little questions arise, like, "What should I eat for dinner?" "Did I remember my sister's birthday?" or "What is the meaning of the resurrected Christ?" we all use different tools and practices to muddle through to an answer. Maybe not *the* answer, but one that helps us in the moment (breakfast for dinner is always acceptable). Whether by intention or negligence, our habits and disciplines always impact how we make meaning out of mystery.

The community of Christ-followers had a lot of mystery through which to muddle in the post-Easter life of the church. Making meaning out of something as incomprehensible as the death and resurrection of the Messiah is a big deal! But the disciples, the early church, and Christians today can follow a pattern used in diverse settings from HR training to chaplaincy programs alike: act, reflect, act.

Making meaning requires the quiet pause of reflection – noticing what we see, hear, smell, feel, and taste. What just happened? Who was involved? How did I feel? But it also requires action, a pivot, a new hypothesis, a directive. Acting without reflecting is walking in circles and reflecting without acting is digging ourselves into a bunker. Combined, action/reflection/action can lead us into deeper and juicier vocations, relationships, and meaning. The iterative process can help us answer the "So what?" question—what does this matter to me, how does this change me, and what are the implications in my own life?

When we've all recovered from the emotional roller coaster that is Holy Week and the Triduum, when the Easter Peeps are stale and the bunny cake is molding in the back of the fridge, when our Lenten disciplines feel as long ago and forgotten as our New Year's resolutions, how have we changed? What is the "So What?" What is the *meaning* of the Resurrection in our lives? To find out, let us follow the example of our scripture to act and reflect in community.

In the gospel story we read in Luke today, we zoom into the scene of two people walking home. They have probably just attended Passover celebrations in Jerusalem and are walking back to Emmaus. It's a long walk, and they are discussing all the things that happened over the weekend. The events (and rumors) that

transpired over the Passover holiday, including the crucifixion of Jesus, were wild and widespread, and they thought it strange that the person walking beside them hadn't heard. The events had also been hard, and confusing, and mysterious, and the scripture says, "They stood still, looking sad." They explained to the stranger what they knew: There was a man named Jesus, from Nazareth, who was mighty in action and preaching. They were hoping Jesus would redeem Israel, but instead he died in a crucifixion arranged by the religious leaders. And now something else weird had happened— some women they knew said they had met angels at the empty tomb, angels who said Jesus was still alive.

All of this was mystifying. They had experienced a weekend of action. And now they were on a walk, reflecting. Together.

The stranger-on-the-road-who-is-actually-Jesus responds with, essentially, a Bible study. He walks with them and talks about the scriptures and interprets them from Moses and beyond. When the trio arrives at the village, the friends persuade Jesus to stay with them, maybe out of hospitality and concern for him, maybe because what he had to say was interesting and helped them process the weekend, and there they shared a simple supper. And perhaps it was the way he blessed the food, or explained the scripture, or maybe they saw the wounds in his hands as he passed out the bread, but they suddenly knew who they were with. And by the time they realized that *this* was the Messiah, he was gone. "Were not our hearts burning within us?" they asked each other.

With the action of the Passover celebration behind them, the disciples were able to reflect through community, scripture, and a meal. And out of that reflection and pause came a reveal or an epiphany, and then— action. The disciples had just walked to a new village, but the meaning revealed to them gave them enough energy to return to where they had come from and tell others about their meeting with Christ. "He had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread." By acting and reflecting, meaning was made from the conversation, the scripture, and the meal.

So what?

Do you think these disciples felt differently now that they had seen Christ themselves? How did their new sense of meaning and understanding change their lives, their direction, their relationships? They shared their experiences with other disciples, and were changed. Hopefully, the disciples' transformation led to action, reflection, and action of others around them. Do you think people believed their experience, just like the disciples had been "astounded" after hearing from the women who witnessed the empty tomb?

The events of this Passover weekend continue to impact the world in the next decades and centuries— our lives are as transformed by the resurrection as those who witnessed Christ resurrected on the first Easter day!

The Book of Acts is written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, just a few generations after the resurrection of Jesus. Most of this chapter of Acts is a sermon given by Peter, and we arrive in

today's lectionary selection at the conclusion of it. What comes before Peter's spontaneous sermon is important because it's the day of Pentecost: violent wind, tongues of fire, suddenly speaking in different languages, all enabled by the Holy Spirit. The crowds have lived through a great *action*, and Peter stands up to help the community *reflect* on it.

Like Jesus in the story from the gospel, Peter uses the Holy Scripture as a basis of his speech. In the earlier parts of the account, Peter returns to the prophet Joel, who wrote that God's promise, blessing, and outpouring of the Spirit is on *all* people, not just some: "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). Peter tells the crowd they are at fault for Jesus's crucifixion and reminds them that Jesus cannot remain bound by death. He testifies that he has seen the resurrected Jesus, and that the presence of the Spirit at Pentecost is the work of the risen Christ.

Then we get to Acts 2:36, today's assigned reading. The people have experienced the Pentecost action, they have reflected with Peter using the Holy Scriptures, and now they are called to act. They ask, "What should we do?" And Peter says, "Repent, and be baptized." Peter does not simply remind them that they are perfect and loved by God and covered in grace (although they are), he also calls on them to act with conviction and sacrament. God saves, but the people must receive the Spirit through repentance and faith, faith leading to action such as baptism. Turn toward God through repentance and express your belief and trust in God through baptism.

The message is so true and timely for us today. We cannot stop with belief, although we receive the grace and love of God just by being us. We are also called by our Baptismal Covenant, by our community, by our scriptures, and by the example of Jesus, to act, to reflect together, and then repent and live our lives in a way so full of the Spirit, people ask us about it.

It's not an if/then— if you repent and are baptized you will be saved— but a "So what?" I *am* saved, and *so* I can live without fear, proclaiming the gospel in word and deed. In his letter to the early church, written in the same decades as the book of Acts, Peter says, "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart." You are loved, and so love.

The Psalmist collects all these intentions to act because we have been saved: "I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people." May we all do so, not because we have to, but because we have taken action, and reflected, and been moved to action again, together with God and each other. Amen.

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