

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon  
May 8, 2011  
Luke 24.13-35  
"Emmaus"  
Pastor John Guthrie

What sets your heart afire? Whenever I think of people whose hearts are afire, my mind always turns first sports fanatics. I think of those guys who go to the games, in sub-freezing weather, wearing no shirts, with the names of their teams painted on their chests, their faces painted in the colors of their teams, with all of the team hats, scarves, horns, and other paraphernalia. They jump and scream and shout and beat each other on the shoulders. Now those guys are excited about something! Their hearts are on fire.

Frankly, that's the way we are supposed to be about Jesus. We don't have to be quite so overt about it, but that's the way we should be. After all, we have something a thousand times more exciting than a football team. We have the joy of redemption and boundless love, of being made new creatures in Christ. And we have the excitement of carrying his love into a world that badly needs the healing and hope of that love. Now that's something to set a heart on fire!

In today's reading from Luke two Jesus followers are walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a distance of about seven miles, we are told. One of them is named Cleopas, but we don't know the name of the other. The other walker could be a woman, and could even be Cleopas' wife. I think Luke leaves the other walker unidentified, so that you and I can place ourselves in his or her place. You and I are the other walker.

It is the afternoon of the day Jesus was raised. The two had heard an amazing story from the women who had visited the tomb early that morning. That account is found in the first part of Luke chapter 24.

A number of women, followers of Jesus, had gone to the tomb in order to anoint his body with spices, as was the practice back then. When the women arrive the stone is rolled away from the mouth of the tomb, and the body is not there. The women are confused and distressed. Suddenly two men in dazzling white clothes appear and tell the women that Jesus has risen, just as he told them he would. The women are terrified, but after the men vanish they return to the other followers of Jesus, telling them the story. Apparently Cleopas and his friend are among those who hear the women's astounding account, either firsthand or otherwise.

As the two walk along, Jesus himself joins them on the road, but they do not recognize him. In the same way, according to John's gospel, when he appears to Mary

Magdalene, she is at first unable to recognize him. There is a sense in which the risen Christ is hidden from us, a way in which he is shrouded in mystery. That makes some sense when you think about it. He is, after all, God. Fully divine, as well as fully human. In his resurrected form, he is preparing to return to his Father. Transformed in some way. Transfigured in some way.

Jesus asks the two travelers what they are discussing on the road, and Cleopas is somewhat amazed that this stranger doesn't know about the things that have taken place over the last few days in Jerusalem. How this Jesus from Nazareth, "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" had been arrested and handed over to the Romans, had been crucified and died. They tell Jesus about the amazing story the women had told them. Jesus replies, "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 he proceeds to show them how all of these things had been foretold by Moses and the prophets.

They are obviously amazed by his wisdom and learning, but they still do not recognize him. When they reached Emmaus, Jesus prepares to continue on, but the two beg him to stay with them. He does. Then in verse 30 we read, "When he 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."

There are clearly references to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the words Jesus speaks to the two pilgrims. In chapter 22 Luke relates the story of the Last Supper. We read there, "Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Among the other things that we recall when we gather around the Lord's Table is this meal that Jesus shares with the two travelers in the village of Emmaus. That meal is not a remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus, but rather of his amazing and wondrous resurrection. When we eat and drink together at this table, we also remember that Jesus broke bread with these two wondering disciples after he was raised. We follow a Messiah who lives.

We understand that that same Messiah is never away from us, never apart from us, that there is no place we can go where he is not present. But we also acknowledge a mystery, that he is uniquely and powerfully present when we gather around his table to enjoy the Lord's Supper together. That when we celebrate the Eucharist with each other, Christ is with us in a way like no other. So we recognize Christ in a wonderfully unique way when we enjoy the Lord's Supper, just like the two travelers did in Emmaus.

Cleopas and his friend are so overwhelmed with joy and excitement that they immediately leave the place they have found to stay and start the seven-mile journey back to Jerusalem. It is almost certainly dark when they arrive, and normally people

didn't travel at night in those days. Too much danger from robbers. But the two couldn't wait to share the news with the other disciples.

On the return trip they say to each other, "Were our hearts not burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That's what the living Christ does. He sets our hearts on fire. There are some things you and I can do to prepare our hearts for that burning. We cannot build the fire ourselves, but we can prepare them.

When I was a Boy Scout, we used to have annual contests among the local troops where we would compete in basic outdoor skills. One of those contests was to see which team could start a fire with flint and steel in the shortest time. We were allowed to prepare our tinder in advance, but it had to be natural tinder. In our part of Texas the preferred natural tinder was dry cedar bark. So we would find dead cedar trees and strip the bark from them. Then we would take the bark and rub it in our hands until it looked like a bird's nest. If we kept it dry it made excellent tinder. If things worked right, we could strike a spark into the cedar bark bird's nest, then pick it up and blow into it until it began to smoke and finally burst into flame.

Jesus opened the scriptures to the two sad travelers. In the same way Jesus opens the scriptures to us, but we have to spend time in the scriptures in order for that to happen. Have you ever had the experience of your heart set on fire by some passage, some word from the Bible? It happens. Read the Bible daily, and meditate on what you read. Allow Jesus to instruct you, and you will, at least from time to time, find your heart set on fire. It happens.

Regular prayer prepares your heart for burning. Be diligent, be protective of a daily time of prayer. As with reading scripture, your heart will sometimes, perhaps often, be set on fire. Spend time in prayer.

The travelers say to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?" And then Luke writes, when they report to the eleven disciples, "They told what had happened on the road." On the road. Reminds me a little of the famous Willie Nelson song.

But what is actually written, in both places, in the original Greek, is "on the way." "Were our hearts not burning within us while he was talking to us 'on the way?'" In his sequel to this gospel, the Book of Acts, Luke speaks of disciples as those who follow "The Way," that is, the Way of Jesus. You and I are daily "on the way," following this mysterious Christ who sets our hearts on fire. We don't have to literally be traveling anywhere, because each day, each week, each month, is a journey "on the way," a journey with Christ, in which he talks to us. How exciting is that?!

Ultimately, only Jesus can set our hearts on fire. All we can do is to prepare the tinder. I pray that each of you, and me, and all of us together, will be keeping our tinder dry and ready, so that Christ can set our hearts on fire: you and me, and all of us together.

Because when that happens, there is no limit to what God can do with us and through us.