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Luke 24:13-35
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The Eucharistic Community

“They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road . . .’” (Lk 24:32). I wonder, when we come together each week to worship the living God, the One who made us, the One who redeems us, the One who sustains us on the glorious and perilous pilgrimage of life, can we say the same? Do we come here for reasons other than mere social convention? Do we find here something more than mere ritual observance? Do we leave here hungering and thirsting for something more significant than Sunday brunch? When we join together in worship, do our hearts burn within us, igniting us from the inside out with the transforming fire of the Spirit? Do we discover a new appreciation for the past, a new understanding of the present, and a new hope for the future? Do we look back in wonder at the gift we have been given, namely, the presence of the Holy One in our very midst, a life-altering encounter with the life-giving Lord, which leaves us forever changed?

Is that your experience of worship? According to Luke, it should be. The story of the disciples encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus is typically interpreted as a resurrection story. And, of course, it is. But it is also something more. Behind and beneath the story of resurrection is the story of Christian worship. The disciples are together on the road, and there they meet the risen Jesus, who is revealed to them through Scripture and the breaking of bread, after which they return to Jerusalem to bear witness to all they have seen and heard. All the essential elements are present – gathering, hearing, feeding, sending. Luke seems to be suggesting that the road to Emmaus runs

straight through the heart of the Christian community; that it is here above all, in the gathered assembly, that the risen Christ is made known.

Today we continue our exploration of the Eucharistic liturgy. We have journeyed thus far through the gathering rite, the proclamation of the Word, and the Nicene Creed. Today we come to what many would argue is the heart of the matter, the climax of our liturgical story. It is called by many names: Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Mass, the Divine Mystery, the Great Offering. We call it a sacrament. Others call it an ordinance, and still others a memorial. No matter what we call it, no matter how we theologize about it, it will always remain, in a real sense, the primordial act of Christian worship. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us that the first Christian community "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42); "they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts . . ." (Acts 2:46). From its earliest days, the church has been a Eucharistic community. The meals shared in first-century Christian homes likely bore little resemblance to what we call Holy Communion. As far as we can tell, they were not ritualized re-enactments, but actual meals served at actual tables. Still, thanks was given, bread was broken, and wine was poured in remembrance of Jesus. It's an astonishing thing, when you think about it – in two thousand years of recorded history, not a Sunday has passed without some Christians somewhere sharing in this sacred feast.

The word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving. And it is with glad and grateful hearts that we prepare for this holy banquet. The whole of the liturgy is an offering, not only of our thanks and praise, but of our hearts, our minds, our wills, our lives. In the Middle Ages, the Eucharist was understood primarily as a sacrifice. Each time the priest stood at

the altar, Christ was sacrificed anew. While the prayer book still uses the language of sacrifice, the meaning has changed. It is not the priest who sacrifices Christ; it is we who sacrifice “ourselves, our souls and bodies.” We offer our whole selves to God’s service. This is signified, among other places, in the Offertory, when money – a cultural symbol of worth, of livelihood, and, in that sense, of life – is collected and placed on the altar along with the bread and wine.

During the Offertory, the people are invited to stand, which is both the ancient posture of prayer and an indication that we are all participants in this grand drama. There are no spectators here, no outsiders at this meal. We are all members of one family gathered at one table for one purpose – to give our lives up and take God’s life in.

The Eucharistic prayer begins with the *Sursum Corda*, which is Latin for “lift up your hearts.” This dialogue comes from the Jewish tradition, in which “Lift up your hearts” was a simple invitation to stand. Today we understand it not as a physical but as an emotional and spiritual invitation, an invitation to join with joy in the Great Thanksgiving. This is, after all, a celebration, a festival. It may be serious, but it is not somber. Though to look around it might surprise us, there are no rules against smiling during communion.

Praise and joy go hand in hand. When it comes to the *Sanctus*, that great hymn of praise – “Holy, holy, holy Lord” – we should all join in and we should join in with joy, with wonder, with awe. This is no dirge, but the song of the angels we’re singing! This is no lament, but the heavenly chorus! This is the one God, living and true, whom we praise! We should do so with gusto, we should do so with verve, we should do so with joy!

It’s hard not to when we remember all that God has done for us. And the Prayer of Consecration begins by doing precisely this, by taking us through the grand story of

salvation, rehearsing those acts of creation and redemption through which God's love for us is revealed. This is why we're here; this is what we're thankful for – while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. When we went astray, God sent a search party. When we were far off, God brought us near. When we were in death, God gave us life.

Jesus calls us to remember this, now and always, by remembering him. At the heart of the Prayer of Consecration are the Words of Institution, the narrative of the Last Supper, taken almost word for word from the biblical accounts. Most of us know these words well: “This is my body, which is given for you . . . This is my blood, which is shed for you . . . Do this for the remembrance of me.” Memory is a powerful thing. It binds the present to the past and the past to the present. While the Eucharist is certainly more than a memorial meal, it is never less. For it is in part through remembrance that Christ becomes present to us. In the biblical understanding, to remember is not simply to bring something from the past to mind. It is in fact to bring something from the past into the present. Through remembrance, we transcend time. We don't simply recall Jesus in the upper room, we are there at table with him. Moreover, as Episcopal priest and writer Christopher Webber notes, “Memory does not depend on absence; rather, memory is often triggered when someone's presence calls to mind all they have meant to us. So the disciples on the road to Emmaus, believing Christ dead and buried, remembered him when he took bread and broke it.”

“This is my body. This is my blood.” In the Roman Catholic tradition, this is the high point of the prayer, the moment when the common elements of bread and wine are transformed into the holy mysteries of Christ's body and blood. The Eastern Christian churches, meanwhile, have long insisted that the transformation takes place when the priest calls down the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine. For its part, the

Episcopal Church has always included both elements in its prayers and has never tried to define a precise moment of transformation. This is surely the better part of wisdom. Much ink – and not a little blood – has been spilled over debates about just how and just when this miraculous transformation occurs. Oh yes, ideas abound – transubstantiation, consubstantiation, nonsubstantiation. One practically needs a PhD in philosophy to comprehend the intricacies of such theories. But if you don't have one, don't worry. Because it doesn't really matter. What matters is that Christ is truly present in the sacrament. What matters is that when we consume the bread and wine we are consuming Christ Jesus, ingesting his life, so that, in the words of St. Paul, it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. Is Jesus present physically or spiritually? Is he present in the Eucharistic elements or in the heart of the believer who consumes them in faith? I would tell you if I could, but I haven't the slightest idea. This is a deep and luminous mystery. And mysteries cannot be explained, but only experienced. "This is my body. This is my blood." It is enough to take Jesus at his word and leave the rest to God. How he is present, when he is present, no one can really say. But *that* he is present, two thousand years of Christian experience affirms without question.

When the celebrant breaks the bread, I imagine the life of Jesus spilling out onto the altar, flowing down the chancel steps, through the church, and into the world. Bread must be broken if it is to be shared. In the same way, Christ must be broken; in the same way, we must be broken, if we are to give our lives and live our lives to and for each other. To be taken, blessed, broken, and given – this is what bread is for. It has no other purpose. To be taken, blessed, broken, and given – this is what life is for – God's life, my life, your life. It has no other purpose. The Eucharist is the supreme sacrament of self-giving. We give ourselves to God, Christ gives himself to us, and through that great

exchange we are transformed, because through that great exchange we become one – one with God, one with Christ, one with each other. That is what “communion” means. “Be what you see; receive what you are,” St. Augustine said. What we see and what we are is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the continuation of the incarnation, the living presence of the risen Jesus at work in the world today.

So I ask again, do our hearts burn within us this day? Have we come here out of obligation or of desire? Have we come here because we were pushed or because we were pulled? Have we come because it’s expected, because we’re supposed to, because it’s simply what one does on Sunday morning? Have we come to sit, to stand, to kneel, to pray, and then be on our way? Or have we come because we long to meet the living God – to hear, to see, to touch, to taste the One in whom we live and move and have our being, the One who gives life, the One who is life? It’s possible, you know. It happens all the time. We just have to open our eyes, our ears, our hands, our mouths. Risen Lord, be known to us, this day and always, in the breaking of the bread.