

## Easter 3 Year A 2011

This morning we heard the Gospel story about what happened on the road to Emmaus. Two of Jesus disciples were walking along and talking about all of the things that had just happened as they made their way to the village called Emmaus. I want to begin exploring this story with something written in 1928 by Halford E. Luccock. He was a prominent American Methodist minister and a professor of Homiletics at Yale's Divinity School. He wrote, “resurrection, the first institution of Christianity came into existence. It was not baptism, not the Lord’s Supper, not the mass, not even formal Christian worship. It was an experience meeting... It was a little prayer meeting—and its sole content was the relation by those present of how Christ had appeared to them. It was not argument; it was not eloquence, save for that supreme “eloquence” of Christian experience.

It was not merely the first Christian institution. It was more. It was and is the only permanently effective Christian institution—the recital of actual experience of Christ. It was the first demonstration of the methods by which the Christian faith and life were to spread and did spread. It was also the first demonstration of the method by which it must always win its way, if it is to be more than a thin veneer on the surface of life, more than a pitifully transparent coat of paint over a foundation of paganism.

“They related their own experience.” That is the unfailing Christian apologetic, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. It is the one sure basis of Christian conquest. From the very birthday of the Christian Church there comes across the centuries a tremendously timely and urgent message for our own time. This Easter...experience ... points the way to the answer to the great bewilderment and search of the multitudes of our day... Many of the conventional foundations of

authority are no longer adequate for men of the modern world. An infallible church, an authoritative creed, a literally inspired Book—all of these sources of authority are still offered the world... Yet these cannot meet the needs of earnest multitudes.”

For the disciples and early followers of Jesus “...The certainty and authority was not in the *church*. There was no church. It was not founded on an authoritative *creed*. There was no creed. It was not founded on an inspired and infallible *book*. The New Testament did not exist. The ground of their assurance was their experience of God in and through the historical Jesus. This the New Testament affirms is the unshakable and immovable reality.

The Christian experience of God is the one thing needful. It is the one thing that we can positively least afford to lose. .... The Christian experience of God alone answers the quest of the human soul for certainty. It alone is the unshakable ground of Christian faith and of Christian knowledge.”

So this Gospel story we have this morning on the road to Emmaus is what Halford E. Luccock calls, “the recital of the actual experience of Christ.” Walking along the road to Emmaus is a place of encounter with God in Jesus Christ. So where is this road to Emmaus?

In 2005 I journeyed with a group of people from all over the world to Israel and one of our trips was to the village of Emmaus. Emmaus as we heard in the Gospel this morning is the village in which Jesus first appeared after the Resurrection. It is described as being not far from Jerusalem, but its identification with any particular location is still not certain. Since the fourth century or earlier, the ancient city of Nikopolis was identified as the biblical Emmaus and it has become over the centuries an important pilgrimage destination. As with most of the identified places in the Holy Land there is a church, an altar, or a shrine of some sort to mark the event and location of something important that

happened. And so when I visited this place of Emmaus we celebrated the Eucharist in a 4th or 5th century Byzantine basilica that stands as the marker for this place of Jesus resurrection appearance.

Pilgrimage to Israel is a wonderful and powerful experience but like this basilica which stands on the spot of Emmaus such destinations cannot stand alone as the best places to encounter God. And as lovely as it is, modern scholars think this site which has been visited for centuries is highly unlikely to actually be the biblical Emmaus, mainly because it's too far from Jerusalem.

And like wanting to pin point the location of Emmaus we Christians can get hung up on what I call our churchliness. We can forget that God is encountered beyond our church doors and rituals. As Halford Luccock back in 1928 reminds us ...for the earlier followers of Jesus there was no church, there were no creeds, and the New Testament scriptures did not exist. Those scriptures were being lived. The first institution of Christian experience was the disciple's experience of the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus.

So where is the road to Emmaus? I think the road is everywhere and anywhere because Emmaus is a place of encounter with Jesus. Emmaus is a place of encounter with God. Emmaus is the place where our eyes are opened. Emmaus is the place where our hearts burn within us. Emmaus is the place when we expect and plan for one thing and another happens. The road to Emmaus is right here as you enter the church and break bread with God in Jesus Christ. And the road to Emmaus leads you from here as you move into the parish hall or exit to the street. The road to Emmaus is at the mall, the grocery store, and in your home. The road to Emmaus is in the halls of the hospital or the rooms of your doctor's office. The road to Emmaus is at the mission

and the FISH food pantry; it's in the conversations you will have over breakfast and dinner. Emmaus is the high road, it's the low road, it's the highways and bridges, and it's your life. It's not just in Israel, or in our church, or in one special place or another because at the very heart of our faith is the resurrection experience of the risen Christ in our lives. We relate our own experience of God to the world as did those early followers of Jesus. If daily we allow the experience of resurrection to come into our lives then the road always leads to Emmaus. Emmaus is the road to new life. And this rebirth alone, this resurrection alone, this new life alone, is the quest of the human soul. Amen.