The Opening

St. Paul’s ~ Syracuse, NY ~ April 26, 2020

Our story from the Gospel of Luke illustrates one of the main elements of our journey with God; when we are walking with God our vision of the world changes and expands over time. Our relationship with God changes us by opening our eyes to see the world in a new way. That is what happens to the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

I am struck as I read this story that the disciples are making their way through a difficult, confusing time. This is true, even on this afternoon of the day of the resurrection. We can hear the uncertainty and fear in their voices as Cleopas responds to Jesus’ question: The things about Jesus of Nazareath, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

Notice that, even though they have heard the testimony of the women, for the disciples the story about Jesus is a past tense event. Far from being a day of joy, the disciples seem sad and lost in their thoughts on this first Easter afternoon: we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

The disciples are confused, even as they are preoccupied with the details of the story. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”

If the disciples had understood the meaning of the Easter event they might be joyfully congregating in the burial garden at the empty tomb, or at least gathered together in one place, offering prayers of thanksgiving. They do not understand. They are preoccupied with the details of their immediate situation. Even as the risen Christ walks down the road with them, they do not see clearly. Even after he interprets the meaning of the events, even after he traces the connections between the Easter event and the Hebrew Scripture, they do not understand.

The disciples do not recognize the risen Christ. They do not see the meaning of the resurrection for their lives. They are preoccupied with their thoughts of past events. They do not see Jesus. It is only after Christ himself spends many hours with them that they begin to see clearly. It is only after he breaks the bread with them that their eyes are opened.

It often seems to be that our eyes are opened to the truth, only after a time of fear and confusion, only after a time of great sadness or loss. 2000 years later, it is easy for us to assume that the meaning of Easter was obvious to the first disciples. We forget that somewhere in the story there was an enormous shift in their vision of the world. We forget that somehow, in the midst of a time of fear and desperation, their eyes were opened to the truth. We forget that it was only a few dozen disciples who understood the meaning of the resurrection while the world continued its spiral of confusion, fear and death.

There is tremendous relevance of the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus for us. But in order to see our situation more clearly, consider one of the last times our nation faced a similar situation, which was during World War II. In this month of April thousands of American doctors and nurses, tens of thousands of patients and their families are in a situation that would only find adequate analogies from a time of war.

As it was for those in the early days of the war, we are in a time of confusion and fear. We have no clear idea when the threat of death and the economic disruption will end. And as it is for us, World War II focused a light on one of the great injustices of America, which was and still is racial segregation.
However the tragedy of World War II created an opening for people to see at least one small part of the world in a new way. During World War II the universal failure of segregation could be seen most clearly in the armed forces. Through the end of World War II all U.S. armed forces were segregated by race. In some services there were separate battalions of African American soldiers. In some services African Americans were only permitted to serve in non-combat roles, such as cooks or musicians.

Three years after the end of the war President Truman issued an executive order, which established the legal basis for equal opportunity for all service personnel, regardless of race. This was the first action of the U.S. government to end segregation or discrimination. It only came after a long period of fear, uncertainty and desperation.

President Truman faced resistance from some leaders of the military. Some people refused to see the world in a new way. The Secretary of the Army was forced to resign for failing to implement desegregation of the army. It often seems to be that our eyes are opened to the truth, only after a time of great sadness or loss.

As the weeks pass we see more clearly that we are facing the greatest challenge our nation and the world have faced since the end of the Cold War and perhaps since the end of World War II. The threat of disease is not going away next week or next month. We can hope that a vaccine will be created, tested and widely distributed in 10 months or 12 months or 14 months, but that is the best case scenario. We are making our way through a sustained time of physical separation and economic instability. As we move forward together, we derive wisdom and courage from the stories of the disciples at the first Easter and from the stories of our parents and grandparents.

We must begin by being patient with ourselves and with each other. Each time I read today’s Gospel story I am struck by the fact that Jesus’ disciples did not recognize him for many hours, even as he was speaking with them. They are preoccupied. They are sad and filled with melancholy, even as they are walking next to the risen Christ. They did not recognize him until he broke the bread with them. If you have a day when you are sad and grieving, if you are confused and don’t see the way forward, please, be patient with yourself.

Notice that many people will remain stuck in the past, in their old grievances. All people sometimes fail to listen to God’s voice and some people always fail to listen to God’s voice. This was the case with that Secretary of the Army, the one Truman was forced to fire. The struggle to see God’s vision and live into God’s vision for us is always going to be exactly that: a struggle. Please understand that this is not just our struggle, God is walking beside us.

Notice that God is always calling us. God is always calling us to God’s vision of justice, truth and love. This was true for Americans in the centuries leading up to President Truman’s executive order. God was always calling us end our divisions and seek to live together as one people. This was also true for Jesus’ first disciples in the weeks and months leading up to Easter. Long before Easter, Jesus was calling them to a vision of the kingdom life. Jesus was calling them to leave behind the old standards of honor and exclusion and to embrace the way of love and inclusion. God is always calling us.

Notice that it is precisely in our times of fear and confusion that we experience an opening to see God’s vision. The desperation and loss of World War II created an opening for white Americans to begin to see the evils of segregation. The tragedy of Good Friday and the chaos of Easter Sunday created an opening for the disciples to begin to see Jesus as the Christ. The disciples had to experience the loss of their Lord and master in order for them to be empowered in new roles as leaders of the church.

Let it be that way for us today. Let this time of chaos be a time when we recognize the face of Christ in the ones journeying beside us. Let this time of hardship be a time when we are empowered in our struggle to build God’s blessed community in our time and place. Let this time
of separation be a time when we move closer to God who opens our hearts and minds to the way of love.