

“The Heart Always Remembers”

April 30, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Third Sunday of Easter, Year A

Text: “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. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

-- Luke 24:30-32 NRSV



(Image credit: Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret, “Christ and the disciples at Emmaus,” 1897)

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Every summer of my life, the Silbert family, in various numbers and combinations, have piled into family cars and traveled north – like geese following some arcane fly-way – whether from nearby Fayette county, or Rhode Island – heading to our beloved Squam Lake, New Hampshire . . . Our hearts “home sweet home.”

I always loved going to Squam Lake – it was so exciting! It seemed as though I had my toys packed a month ahead of time; I couldn’t sleep the night before . . . (my parents couldn’t either, but for

different reasons that now as an older parent I now understand more fully!). When dawn came, we began the journey.

We always looked for the landmarks as we traveled along – landmarks that confirmed that the way we were going was in fact leading us in the right direction. Each landmark or sign stirred something deep inside us which made us look all the harder for more – “Ooo! There’s the red barn!” (And we all “Ooed”); “Oohh look! The lines in the road have changed . . . New Hampshire highways painted its roadways differently than other New England states; all of us strained to see the painted roadway – “Oohh!”); “Ummmhhh, smell the pines,” one of us said, and the rest of us, like so many Labrador retrievers, threw our heads out the windows into the wind to sniff deeply. . . It was a production!

And always the road to Squam Lake led us on a journey in which the signs themselves had meaning – each one lifting our hearts a little bit higher, leading us on, bringing us home to what we have loved so well . . . Have you ever taken a journey like that?

Imagine a journey where all the signs and pointers seemed to have disappeared – the road traveled less a familiar highway than it was a lonely and trackless waste. The road we think led Cleopas and his friend to Emmaus was a Roman one that made its way north and west of Jerusalem . . . Cleopas and his unnamed friend walked the road, but nothing seemed right about it, nothing was as it was . . . the familiarity, the hope, the promise of the road, bled from the landscape by circumstances and events they could not have imagined, nor ever desired . . . It was a rugged road that morning on the way to Emmaus . . .

Sometimes the circumstances that surround us – the actual life we have to live – is nothing like we planned it, or hoped it would be and the journey we thought we’d walk with hope has turned again – the shadows lengthened and the signs we thought we’d look for with anticipation have lost their luster – and our hearts are as cold as a dark and rainy April morning:

"Easter-time? My wife and the kids get into it, but it doesn't mean anything to me, ya'know? Work just piles up – tax season and all . . ."

"Since my husband died, I've had a hard time with the hope of Easter. The days seem so empty without him around. There doesn't seem to be much to look forward to . . ."

"I thought things were turning around, headed in the right direction – job, family, plans – but cancer!?"

In moments like these – as all-consuming as these things can be – it is easy to lose our way, to miss the signs that direct and orient us on the journey we mean to take. . . And with our thoughts on these things – dwelling on these things – we are often lost in our own worlds . . .

Cleopas and his friend were also lost in their world – until Jesus came and asked to enter into it:

"What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" He said to them. They stood still, looking sad . . . *"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"* Jesus asked them, *"What things?"*

"What things?" – This is Jesus' knock at their hearts' door . . . As if to say: *"Let me in to where you are – or think you are . . . Show me your world, even if it is in bits and pieces, and let me show you how things go back together in a ways that still leads you on the road home. . ."*

And beginning with the witness of Moses and the prophets, Jesus pointed Cleopas and his friend back on the road to himself – to their hearts 'home sweet home' . . . And the road became a little less rugged and a little more familiar, the landscape a little more recognizable . . . Soon they were stopping for the night, but Jesus seemed to be going further . . . *"Please friend, stay . . . Look the day is quite old and evening is soon; stay . . ."* and so at table that night, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them . . . And it was then that they recognized him. Maybe they simply put this act of bread-breaking together with all the other signs from Scripture about his service that led them to recognize Jesus as he played the role of host at the meal? Maybe it was in the words he said, or how he said them? But maybe – just maybe – he offered them a sign that even they could not ignore – even in a

world of grief – wounded hands – ragged still with the print marks of nails driven deep in each palm – which offered bread to them . . .

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?" Even before their eyes could see them, their hearts remembered him . . . You can see that in the painting I included as the image for today's sermon and bulletin for this Sunday. It is by the French Realist painter Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929). It is a painting that you could say is strongly balanced by the symmetry



of Jesus (at center) forming a large centered triangle. He is flanked by one of the disciples (Cleopas, perhaps?) grouped on the left with the woman serving food who seems stopped, waiting perhaps for Jesus

to finish a prayer of thanks; the other disciple on the right leaning –in towards Jesus pulls into his sphere the child and woman on the right kneeling in quiet and attentive respect (they are at the same level) . . .

But there is something that tugs at the frame; a bit of a-symmetry that disturbs the balance going on . . .

. It is the man in the upper right corner, standing . . . Do you know who he is?

The man standing behind Jesus in the upper right corner is the artist himself, Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret. He has taken the liberty of painting himself into this first century scene, along with the figures of his wife and son, kneeling at the right.

His wife and son are earnest in their respect and admiration, but the artist is skeptical; somewhat restless; his one arm is thrown across his chest, while the other arm uses it as a brace that

places his to rest on his chin; he doesn't know what to think of what he sees here. He is a man of his own time – 1897 – painted into the scene of that evening meal in Emmaus . . . and he wonders, in a world of scientific rigor and philosophical skepticism, on the verge of a new century – a 20th Century – just what is to be done with what is shown here? . . .

What do you make of it all in the 21st Century . . . ?

Have you ever felt the warmth of recognition -- a thing shared – in an otherwise strange world? That despite what you might be feeling, or believing, or experiencing, something enters into the circumstance you are living and stirs your heart into flame?

On a small scale I had this kind of thing happen to me years ago in speaking with someone, like me, who loved ice hockey. We were sharing our mutual appreciation for the game and one of us mentioned how we always went to the college ECAC division I play-offs at Boston Garden:

Me: *You went to the ECACs?*

The other: *Whenever I could.*

Me: *Me too, I tried not to miss it . . . The best one was the year BU and New Hampshire were in the championship . . .*

The other; *1977 . . .*

Me: *77? Yeah, 77! You were at that game?! I was at that game! Where were you sitting?*

The other: *I was two rows from the BU band . . . ohh, it was loud!*

Me: *The BU band?! I was sitting next to the BU band!*

The other: *I was right in front of the trumpets!*

Me: *No way!!! I was right beside the drums!!!*

Both of us: *We were at the same game, a couple rows a part, and we didn't even know each other then – wow!!!*

Now instead of a shared past – a moment, or an event, like a hockey game – imagine that what ignited your heart was a shared hope? That the destination once known – but lost in the

disappointment of expectations unmet and dreams deferred – was rediscovered! That what had been lost from life, had been found again in a new way; found in a way that could persist through the disappointment and the grief and the fear you were feeling at the moment to kindle hope again . . . to set your hearts remembering what it was you once desired above everything else, but had forgotten where to look for it. . .

In worlds like yours and mine that sometimes become confusing and unfamiliar, we need to look for the signs that can help us find the road home again . . . Here in church the signs are offered to us time and again: every time we open up the Good Book, we find him there walking with us in our questions, doubts, fears, and skepticism. . . Every time the water is poured out into the font, we are invited to find gladness again in the joy of being God's own children through baptism. . . and every time we gather at this table for supper, it is an occasion for the Lord to linger with us long enough that perhaps in this moment our eyes will recognize what our hearts have already remembered: that our deepest desire in life has always been to find our way home to him – and in the breaking of the bread we realize instead, he has made his way on the long road to us.

Jesus walks the road you walk today, and joins you on your journey full of questions, hopes dashed, fears, failures and dreams deferred. And as you let him into your world, he offers it back to you in a new way – a resurrected way – persisting through the hurts and pains and deaths you die to offer hope and joy once more . . . to offer himself to you deep-down in your heart . . . remember?

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.