

3rd Sunday of Easter, Year A
Acts 2:14, 22-33
Ps 16 *passim*
1Pet 1:17-21
Lk 24:13-35

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We can count on St. Luke for a good story. Luke and only Luke gives us the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan and Zaccheus, the short guy who had to climb a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus. And only in Luke's Gospel do we get the story of the two disciples trudging home to Emmaus.

But why, you might be asking, why didn't we hear the Emmaus story last year, when we were working our way through specifically the Gospel of Luke? Last year was Year C, the 3rd year of our 3-year lectionary cycle. This is Year A, when the focus is on Matthew. Why do we reach back and pull in this intriguing Emmaus story now?

One reason, I think, is a theme we discovered a couple of months ago, when we were in the early weeks of Ordinary Time, when St. Matthew presented Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount. Being a Jewish Christian, and writing for an audience of Jewish Christians, Matthew wanted to emphasize that the teachings and traditions of the Jewish religion were preserved in this new Jesus movement that eventually came to be known as the Church. "I did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets," Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew. "I came to *fulfill* the Law and the Prophets."

But of course how he did that was thoroughly unexpected. He tells the people: "You want the secret to happiness? Sure, but get this: blessed are the poor, blessed are the nonviolent, blessed are the folks who mourn." Or: "You want a great leader charging in on a warhorse to conquer Imperial Rome? Sure, but I'll show you the Messiah God has in mind – a Messiah who rides in on a donkey, gets crowned with thorns, and hangs on a cross."

God surpasses our expectations. Over and over again he fulfills our expectations in ways we don't expect. God is a surprise. On that point the Gospels of Matthew and Luke come together.

How often we expect God to live up to our expectations! . . . It brings to mind a story.

A flood was sweeping through the valley. Joe stood on his front porch as the surging water rose to the top step. A neighbor came by in a rowboat and offered to take Joe to safety. But he said, "I'm a good God-fearing Christian. I trust in the Lord. The Lord will protect me." A few hours later the water had risen to the second floor. There was Joe standing at a window when a motorboat came by and urged him to climb on board. Joe

refused, saying, "The Lord will save me." Now Joe is on the roof clinging to the chimney and the water keeps rising. A helicopter arrives, and drops down a rope ladder. Rescue workers motion to Joe to climb into the helicopter. Joe waves them on. Finally, the floodwaters crest but by then Joe has drowned. Now he stands before the judgment seat of God, and he cries, "Lord, I trusted in you. Why didn't you save me?" And God shakes his head, and says, "C'mon. I sent you two boats and a helicopter!"

Surprise! God's plan didn't match Joe's specifications. God is a surprise.

As for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, their expectations weren't met either. They had had such high hopes, but their hopes were dashed, and now they were on their way home preparing to face the same old same old. They had trusted their senses. The women in Jerusalem said that angels had announced that Jesus was alive, but, since the two disciples and the people they were with in Jerusalem didn't actually *see* Jesus, well, it was just too much to hope for, wasn't it? They trusted their senses, but their senses betrayed them. They didn't recognize Jesus's face; they didn't recognize Jesus's voice. But nonetheless, Jesus walked with them and talked with them and showed them step by step how the story of Jesus – his life and his teachings and his death and his resurrection – fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

They don't recognize Jesus until they sit down with him in table fellowship, until he breaks bread with them. Then they no longer need the evidence of their senses; they see with the eyes of faith, they hear with the ears of faith. And they can turn right around, go back to Jerusalem, and tell the Apostles and the disciples that they have experienced the risen Lord Jesus, they have recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

In the Acts of the Apostles (the second of St. Luke's two volumes), the breaking of the bread is how the early Church referred to the Eucharist. What the two disciples experienced on the road to Emmaus is what we can experience in the celebration of the Eucharist. We are all on the road to somewhere. St. Peter, in today's second reading, refers to this as the time of our sojourning. Are we heading toward God or away from God? Either way, Jesus walks with us. Jesus breaks open the Word of God for us. And Jesus breaks the Bread of Life and pours out the Cup of Salvation for us.

If we don't recognize his face or his voice, it's because we're perceiving with our senses unaided by the eyes and ears of faith. But he is here nonetheless. God is a surprise. God is reaching out to us through Jesus and in his Church. Listen to your heart. Feel the burn. Like the two disciples, get in touch with the burning in your heart. Get over your expectations. See and hear Jesus, with the eyes and ears of faith, in the unexpected ways he reveals himself to you.