

"BAD NEWS, GOOD NEWS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
April 21, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

"I've got some good news and some bad news to share with you" said the farmer to the banker. "Which do you want to hear first?"

The banker replied, "Why don't you give me the bad news first". "Okay" said the farmer. "With the bad drought and inflation and all, I won't be able to pay anything on my mortgage this year....either on the principal or the interest". "Well...that is pretty bad!" said the banker to the farmer.

"Ah, but it gets worse" said the farmer. "I'm not going to be able to pay anything on the loan for all that machinery I bought...not on the principal or interest". "Wow...that is very bad!" admitted the banker to the farmer.

"And it's worse than that" continued the farmer. "You may remember that I also borrowed to buy seed and fertilizer and other supplies. Well, I can't pay anything on that either...principal or interest". "That's awful...terrible" said the banker. "And that's enough. What's the good news?"

"Well, the good news" replied the farmer with a smile...."The good news is that I intend to keep on doing business with you and this here bank!"

DEVELOPMENT

One can't help but wonder if that was good news for the bank or not, but the story does help to lead us into another "post-Easter" sermon text. Let me review parts of it with you...

Two of the disciples of Jesus were on the road that leads to Emmaus, a small town outside of Jerusalem. Their spirits were down...probably feeling as low as that farmer, if not lower. Puzzling things were going on that they did not fully understand. Jesus, their leader, had been crucified like a common thief and they, in turn, had scattered like frightened sheep. But now there were reports that their leader, their Master was not dead after all. There were rumors going around that He had even appeared to some of their most trusted friends. Was it real? What was going on? They were troubled, afraid and confused. Should they believe this astounding good news or stay with the bad news of Good Friday?

And sometimes that's our dilemma, too. Do we believe the good news or the bad? The good news is that Christ is alive. The bad news on the other hand would have to do with just how little impact that event is having in the world today. Is the world any different today than it was two Sundays before Easter?

Time magazine carried an article last August which I happened to glance at while up in Maine, on vacation. It was entitled, The Evolution of Despair by Robert Wright. He was comparing primitive societies to our own without making any judgements. He was just pointing out some of the changes that have taken place. For instance, he said, we don't have to copy or emulate the Old Order Amish who use no cars, electricity or alcohol, but we can profitably ask ourselves why it is that they suffer depression at less than one-fifth the rate of people living in nearby Baltimore? He also made reference to the fact that a western anthropologist tried to study depression among the Kaluli of New Guinea and he couldn't find any!

Interesting, but let me throw out another example. An anthropologist by the name of Philip Walker has spent much time studying the bones of more than four thousand children from hundreds and hundreds of pre-industrial cultures, some dating back as far as four thousand, BC. He has yet to find the scattered bone bruises that are evidence of "Battered Children Syndrome". On the other hand, Walker has estimated that in some modern societies such bruises would be found on more than 1 in 20 children who die between the ages of one and four. Walker suggests a couple of possibilities:

- (1) Unwanted children in primitive societies were often killed at birth, rather than resented and brutalized for years.
- (2) The public nature of primitive child rearing, notably the watchful eye of a child's grandparents or friends.

In the ancestral environment, there was little mystery about what went on behind closed doors.....because there weren't any! Interesting and important factors.

But who can deny that something is happening to us as a people? The anthropologist, George Peter Murdock, has noted that among the Aranda Aborigines of Australia it was quite common for a woman in that culture to breast-feed her neighbor's child while the neighbor went out to gather food. Today, in many places of America, it's no longer common for a neighbor to borrow a cup of sugar. Why, we don't even know our neighbors.

You see there is this growing sense that in the midst of our great affluence, in the midst of our impressive military power and our technological prowess and progress, that at heart we are a sick society. Some social commentators are predicting that as we become a more socially isolated society....as people go into their caves and their cocoons and lose human contact except that provided by a television screen and a computer modem.....that we will become a less caring and more violent society. Some of you may remember how back in the nineteen-fifties we saw theft rates jump in some of our cities in those years that broadcast television was introduced. One wonders what's to happen when a generation is literally reared by broadcast television?

I don't want to sound pessimistic here this morning, but the contrast is startling. Over here, on the one hand is the good news of Christ. On the other hand is the bad news of the world. And so many sit in between...wondering what to do and what to make of it all. At times it's so easy to be fearful and troubled of heart even as those two disciples of Jesus were fearful and troubled on the Emmaus road that day long ago.

You see, as they were making their journey, they were trying to make sense of their situation...trying to make sense of their world...trying to make sense of their future. Many of us have been there on that same walk. Some of you may be there right now. And then Jesus comes to them. This is significant. Jesus doesn't wait for them to find Him. Jesus comes to them, overtakes them even as they are walking that lonely road.

JESUS COMES TO THEM

There is a gripping story of a traveler who was walking along a road one day when a man on horseback rushed by. There was blood on his hands and there was an evil look in his eyes. Minutes later a crowd of riders drew up and wanted to know if this traveler had seen someone with

blood on his hands go by. They were in hot pursuit of him. The traveler asked,

"Who is it?" An evildoer." said the leader of the crowd.
"And you pursue him in order to bring him to the bar of justice?" asked the traveler. "No" said the leader, "We pursue him in order to show him the way".

The picture we have in the New Testament is that of a God who pursues us so that God may show us the way. As Frances Thompson in The Hound of Heaven as put it,

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
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Adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after."

Christ comes to the two disciples. They do not recognize Him, but it is He who takes the initiative. He walks with them and opens up the Scriptures to them.

A WORD WE NEED TO HEAR

We need to hear time and again this "word" about the Christ who comes to us. We often think that we must pound on Heaven's door to get God's attention. You know how it sometimes goes:

"If I just pray often enough, and if I get down on my knees...if I clean up my life....if I serve the Church... then maybe God will notice my situation...maybe then God will open the door."

But the picture the New Testament is giving us is not of our pounding on God's door, but of Christ gently knocking on ours. And that door, as Holman Hunt, has reminded us in his painting in St. Paul's in London...that door, that gate must be opened from inside. There is no latch on the outside of that door. We are the ones with an attention problem. Christ continually comes to us, but like those two disciples on the Emmaus Road, we do not recognize Him.

There's a story of a British soldier in the First World War who lost heart for the battle and deserted. Trying to reach the coast for a boat to England that night, he ended up wandering in the pitch black night...hopelessly lost. In the darkness, he came across what he thought was a signpost. It was so dark that he began to climb the post so that he could read it and find out where he was. As he reached the top of the pole, he struck a match to see and found himself looking squarely into the face of Christ. Suddenly it came to him that instead of running into a signpost, he had climbed a roadside crucifix. Then he remembered the One who had died for him....the One who had endured....who had never turned back. The next morning the soldier was back in the trenches.

Maybe that's what you and I need to do in those moments of distress and of darkness. Strike a match in the darkness and look on the face of Christ. For

Christ is here. He comes to us just as He came to those two disciples on the path to Emmaus even though we may not recognize Him. He takes the initiative. He knocks on the doors of our lives. As the scripture reminds us, "We love Him because He first loved us." How many times I heard that line in seminary!

When the two disciples arrived at Emmaus, they were so enraptured with their new friend whose identity they did not know, that they begged Him to stay with them and He did! And then something very beautiful and mysterious took place. While they were having the evening meal, Christ broke the bread, just as He did at the last meal they had shared together before the crucifixion and He blessed it. And suddenly their eyes were open and they recognized Him. And then Luke tells us, He vanished. When the two disciples realized what had happened, they then began to recall how much they had received as Christ had interpreted the Word to them on the road. And they hurried off to tell their story of what had happened to the rest of the disciples.

CHRIST STILL REVEALS HIMSELF TO US

Now, here is what we cannot miss.

Christ reveals Himself to us through the hearing of His Word and through the breaking of the bread. Here is why we come to this church, to this house of worship. Christ is continually coming to us, but we may not recognize Him and who He is. But when we read His word and when we participate in the Sacraments of His Church, we come to see Who He is.

I think our tendency is to look for Christ in the extraordinary and in the spectacular....in the breathtaking. Remember how in the movie, Superman, when he first reveals his superpowers to the world that Lois Lane is dangling from a cable high atop the Daily Planet building, screaming at the top of her lungs and just as she begins her long fall to earth, Superman changes into his flashy red, yellow and blue outfit and swoops up to catch her in mid-air. "Don't worry, Miss" he assures her....."I've got you!"

And she exclaims, "You've got me, but who's got you?" And just about at that moment the helicopter that has been perched on the edge of the building begins to fall straight toward them and the crowd below. But Superman merely grabs it with his one free arm and gently sets both it and Lois Lane safely back on the landing pad. And when he turns to leave, an astonished Lois Lane stammers out, "Who are you?" Superman replies warmly, "A friend" and as he flies straight up into the air with a sort of half twist, Lois faints in a heap.

Many of us would like tfor Christ to come to us in that dramatic fashion, and that is why we miss Him. Christ reveals Himself as He has always revealed Himself...through the Word and through the Sacraments, through the study of Scripture and the breaking of the bread. That's why when we need encouragement we go to our Bibles or we go to church. Because there, Christ is revealed in all His glory!

CLOSING

A missionary who was once imprisoned by the North Koreans hid a tiny New Testament in his cell among his meager possessions. One day the guards found it, took him from his cell, beat him and kicked him with their hobnailed boots until he lay bloody and panting from exhaustion. He later testified:

"They took my New Testament from me, but they could not steal the Word, for I had hidden it in my heart!"

And to that add this....Ben Weir, the Presbyterian missionary who was for so long a hostage in Lebanon, speaks movingly about worshipping while in captivity. Every Saturday night, he tells us, he saved a piece of bread from his supper meal and on Sunday morning he would eat that piece of bread and feel greatly moved by the sense of communing with God's people the world over. Even in those difficult days when he was imprisoned, the bread brought him into the presence of God who comes to us in Jesus.

Let me bring this together by asking each of you what do you feel and what do you do when the world assaults you with nothing but bad news. What do you do when you feel all alone and lose contact with Christ? How do you experience His presence and His encouragement once more? Millions of Christians have found comfort in these two primary means of Grace:

- reading God's Word and joining with others in the breaking of the bread in the Lord's Supper.

As this beautiful story of the Risen Christ on the Emmaus Road lifted the spirits of the two Disciples, so may it be with us in the roads we travel. Let this account remind us that the Risen Christ is among us and may we be aware of His presence. T. S. Eliot speaks "on going" to Emmaus in The Wasteland:

"Who is the ONE who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together,
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapped in a brown mantle, hooded...
I do not know whether a man or a woman....

But who is that on the other side of you?"

PRAYER

We pray, dear God, that we may feel the presence of our Risen Christ...our Risen Lord beside us as we walk the streets of this city in coming days of this week. And open our eyes that we may see Him at work in those places we go...lifting us, comforting us, challenging us...renewing our faith and our perspective. Make us sensitive to His presence in our midst, His voice in our hearts. In His name, we pray. Amen

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DO WE BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS OR BAD?

And that's our dilemma, too....isn't it? Do we believe the good news or the bad? The good news is that Christ is alive. The bad news would have to do with just how little impact that event is having in the world today. In so many ways, this second Sunday after Easter doesn't look that much different from the two Sundays before Easter. April 21st. March 24th. What's changed?

Time magazine carried an interesting article sometime back...late August, I think it was. It was entitled, The Evolution of Despair by Robert Wright. I remember reading it up in Maine on vacation. In this article, Wright was comparing primitive societies to our own. He wasn't praising one and condemning the other. He was just pointing out some of the changes that have taken place. For instance, he said, we don't have to copy or emulate the Old Order Amish, who use no cars, electricity or alcohol, but we can profitably ask ourselves why it is that they suffer depression at less than one-fifth the rate of people in nearby Baltimore. He also made reference to the fact that a western anthropologist tried to study depression among the Kaluli of New Guinea, and he couldn't find any!

Interesting, but let me throw out another example.

How do you explain this? Anthropologist, Philip Walker, has spent time studying the bones of more than four thousand children from hundreds of pre-industrial cultures, dating back to four thousand, BC. He has yet to find the scattered bone bruises that are evidence of "Battered children syndrome". In some modern societies, Walker estimates, such bruises would be found on more than 1 in 20 children who die between the ages of one and four. Walker has suggested a couple of possibilities:

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Interesting and important factors. But who can deny that something is happening to us as a people? Among the Aranda Aborigines of Australia, the anthropologist, George Peter Murdock, noted early this century that it was quite common for a woman in that culture to breast-feed her neighbor's child while the neighbor went out to gather food. Today, in America, it's no longer common for a neighbor to borrow a cup of sugar.

There is this growing sense that in the midst of our great affluence, in the midst of our impressive military power and technological prowess, at heart we are a sick society. Some commentators are predicting that as we become a more socially isolated society....as people go into their caves and cocoons and lose human contact except that provided by a TV screen and a computer modem... we will become a less caring and more violent society. Remember how back in the nineteen fifties so many of our cities saw theft rates jump in those particular years that broadcast television was introduced. What's to happen when a generation is literally reared by broadcast television?

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Christ comes to the two disciples. They do not recognize Him, but it is He who takes the initiative. He walks with them and interprets Scripture for them.

We need to hear this word about the Christ who comes to us. Often we think we must pound on Heaven's door to get God's attention. You know how it goes,

"If I just pray often enough, and if I get down on my knees, if I clean up my life, if I serve the church, then maybe God will notice my situation, maybe then God will open the door".

But the picture the New Testament gives us is not of our pounding on God's door but of Christ gently knocking on ours. We are the ones with an attention problem. Christ continually comes to us, but like those two disciples on the Emmaus road, we do not recognize Him.

There's a story of a British soldier in the First World War who lost heart for the battle and deserted. Trying to reach the coast for a boat to England, that night, he ended up wandering in the pitch black night, hopelessly lost. In the darkness, he came across what he thought was a signpost. It was so dark that he began to climb the post so that he could read it. As he reached the top of the pole, he struck a match to see and found himself looking squarely into the face of Christ. He realized that rather than running into a signpost, he had climbed a roadside crucifix. Then He remember the One who had died for him.... who had endured....who had never turned back. The next morning the soldier was back in the trenches.

Maybe that's what you and I need to do in those moments of our distress and darkness....strike a match in the darkness and look on the face of Christ. For Christ is here. He comes to us just as He came to those two disciples on the road to Emmaus even though we may not recognize Him. He takes the initiative. He knocks on the door of our lives. But the handle is on the inside as Holman Hunts great painting in St. Paul's in London has so often reminded me.

When the two disciples arrived at Emmaus, they were so enraptured with their new friends whose identity they did not know, that they begged Him to say with them. And so He did. And then something very beautiful and mysterious happened.

While they were having the evening meal, Christ broke the bread, just as He did at the last meal they had shared together before His crucifixion and He blessed it. And suddenly their eyes were open and they recognized Him, and then Luke tells us, He vanished. When the two disciples realized what had happened, they began to recall how much they had received as Christ interpreted the word to them on the road from Jerusalem. And they hurried off to tell their story to the rest of the disciples.

CHRIST STILL REVEALS HIMSELF TO US

Now, here is what we cannot miss.

Christ reveals himself to us through hearing the Word and through the breaking of the bread. Here is why we come to this house of worship. Christ is continually coming to us, but we may not recognize Him and Who He is. But when we read His Word and when we participate in the Sacraments of His Church, we come to see Who He is.

I think our tendency is to look for Christ in the extraordinary and in the spectacular, in the breathtaking. Remember in Superman: The Movie, when Superman first reveals his superpowers to the world? Lois Lane is dangling from a cable, high atop the Daily Planet building, screaming at the top of her lungs. Just as she begins her long fall to earth, Superman changes into his flashy red, yellow and blue outfit and swoops up to catch her in midair. "Don't worry, Miss" he assures her, "I've got you."

And she exclaims, "You've got me, but who's got you?" And just then the helicopter that has been perched on the edge of the building begins to fall straight toward them and the crowd below. But Superman merely grabs it with his one free arm and gently sets both it and Lois Lane safely back on the landing pad. And when he turns to leave, an astonished Lois stammers out the words, "Who are you?"

Superman replies warmly, "A friend" and as he flies straight up into the air with a sort of half twist Lois faints in a heap. That's the way we would like for Christ to come to us. ~~And that~~ is why we miss Him. Christ reveals Himself as He has always revealed Himself....through the Word and through the Sacraments... through the study of Scripture and the breaking of the bread. That is why when we need encouragement we go to our Bibles or we go to church. Because there, Christ is revealed in all His glory.

A missionary who was once imprisoned by the North Koreans hid a tiny New Testament in his cell among his meager possessions. One day the guards found it, took him from his cell, beat him and kicked him with their hobnailed boots until he lay bloody and panting with exhaustion. He later testified,

"Suddenly, to their astonishment I began to laugh softly with joy, for I discovered that even after all that brutality I could love them" (He went on.)
"As the blows were coming down on me, the Holy Spirit brought to my memory the word I needed to hear, 'You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you'" (Matthew 5: 43-44)

And he concluded,

"They took my Testament from me, but they could not steal the Word, for I had hidden it in my heart!"

Ben Weir, the Presbyterian missionary who was for so long a hostage in Lebanon, speaks movingly about worshipping while in captivity. Every Saturday night, he tells us, he saved a piece of bread from dinner and on Sunday morning he would eat that piece of bread and feel greatly moved by the sense of communing with God's people all over the world. Even in prison, the bread brought him into the presence of the Lord.

CLOSING

So what do you feel and what do you do when the world assaults you with nothing but bad news. What do you do when you feel all alone and lose contact with Christ? How do you experience His presence and His encouragement once more. Millions of Christians have found comfort in these two primary means of Grace: reading God's Word and joining with others in the breaking of the bread in the Lord's Supper. As this story of the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus brought Him into their lives, so may it be with us. For there Christ is revealed!