

"BREAKING THROUGH"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

As a young child, Helen Keller was imprisoned by the circumstances of her life. She could neither hear nor see. She could feel with her hands, but without sight or hearing, how could she ever know what it was she was feeling.

One day her teacher, Ann Sullivan, took young Helen down a familiar path to the well house where someone was drawing water. Ann let the water run over one of Helen's hands and in sign language spelled into the other, W - A - T - E - R. And suddenly something happened within Helen...something dramatic and life-changing. It was only a five letter word, but for young Helen Keller it was a break-through. She now had a name for a familiar experience - water. If this experience had a name, then other familiar objects and sensations must have names as well. It was as if she had suddenly burst forth from a closely-guarded prison. Now she could be a whole person....experiencing the world as a real human being in spite of her handicaps of being unable to hear and unable to see.

BREAK THROUGH

Such a break through is always exciting and such a break through came to two of the disciples of Jesus following the resurrection. Remember it? The two were making their way on foot to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were in mourning. Their leader, Jesus, had been crucified and they, along with the other disciples of this Galilean, were stunned beyond words. They thought He was the One who had come to redeem Israel, but now....He was dead...crucified like a common criminal between two thieves.

They poured out their grief to one another as they walked slowly down the road leading to Emmaus. They were also mulling over some disturbing news they had received earlier that day. Some of the women had been to the tomb early that morning and discovered that His body was not there. Instead they had encountered an angel who said that Jesus was not dead, but alive. They wondered... what could this all mean? Who could have stolen His body from the grave? What should they and the other disciples now be doing....

As they walked and quietly talked between themselves a stranger came along and joined them in their walk. He broke in on their conversation and asked them, "What is it that you are talking about?" They responded, asking Him...."Could you be the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the tragic events that have taken place these past few days?" Then one of the disciples shared with this stranger all that had taken place...who Jesus was and what had happened to Him, as well as their present grief now mingled with confusion and uncertainty.

Then this Stranger said to them,

"O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken....was it not necessary that Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?"

And then beginning with Moses and the prophets, He interpreted to them everything in the Scriptures relevant to the ministry of the Messiah. As they neared Emmaus it became evident that the Stranger intended to journey farther...beyond this little village. They begged Him to stay with them for the evening and to share more of these wonderful new insights into God's plan and purpose and He did stay!

And that evening, when they were gathered around the table, He took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them....and we read that "their eyes were opened". It was like the experience that Helen Keller had as the water trickled over her one hand while Ann Sullivan spelled out W-A-T-E-R with the other hand. They knew who this Stranger was. It was Jesus. The "so-called" idle tale of the women was confirmed now as an eternal truth. He is alive.

Coming alive to Christ...to His presence among us. That moment of "break through". How does it happen and can it happen to us today? Yes, it can and let me offer two ways that we "modern-day" followers of Jesus can have something of an Emmaus Road experience.

THROUGH THE BREAD OF LIFE: THE WORD

To me, the first way will always be through the BREAD OF LIFE which is

THE WORD....

"Did not our hearts burn within us" asked those two disciples...."As He talked to us on the road...while He opened to us the Scriptures?"

For most of us that is where we will begin in "our encounter" with the Risen Christ. There are those times when the Scriptures come under fire from scholars and from others standing outside the Faith. But for us, the Bible, the WORD remains primary. You may have heard about the lawyer who was presiding over a church meeting and he was accustomed to the normal procedures of a business gathering when the minutes were read and he would affirm their adoption and approval. Well, on this occasion...things were moving along slowly and properly in the conduct of the meeting until somebody read the Scriptures and this lawyer absent-mindedly got up and said,

"If there are no corrections the Scriptures will stand approved as read...." And, he pounded his gavel....

It's a shame that so many let their daily encounter with the Word slide by. But those who discipline themselves to "do" a daily reading of God's WORD will invariably find themselves drawn closer to the Lord.

I think it was John Calvin who was fond of comparing the Scriptures to a pair of "spectacles". He often said that even though we could know something about God from the wonders of creation that such knowledge was fuzzy and incomplete without the aid of the Bible. Calvin insisted that just as people with failing vision need glasses to read even the most beautifully printed volumes, we who are "fallen creatures" must look through the Scriptures to "read" the beauty of God and the many messages He has for us.

When I read the Gospels and think of the historic Jesus...walking the roads of Palestine - clear of eye, calm of voice, compassionate of heart...when I think of His courage as He faced His critics and of His undimmed radiance as He went to His cross....I find my nerves quieting...my mind clearing...my spirit rising.

This is one way we encounter the Risen Christ....reading and reflecting upon God's Word, recorded in the Scriptures....the very BREAD OF LIFE.

IN THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

The other place where we encounter the Risen Christ is in the breaking of the bread....

It is important for us to note that it was when Jesus took the bread and blessed it and broke it that the disciples knew who He was. That was the moment of spiritual "break through". And hearts have been touched and wills made strong for two thousand years when persons have taken the bread and the cup and heard those timeless words,

"This is MY body which was broken for you. This is MY blood which was shed for you and for many".

To me, part of the power of this Sacrament is that we experience it together which reminds us that we are a family....we are Christ's family, and we feel that in a most beautiful way when symbolically we gather around His table. Here all unkind thoughts and mean words about another should be lost and put away...forgotten, forgiven, forever.

Fellowship is at the heart of the body of Christ. We are not "lone Ranger" Christians. We need to remember that this is the joyful feast of the people of God. And we come,

"From the East and from the West....from the North and from the South....and gather at the Lord's table. Come - not because you must, but because you may. Come, not to show that you are righteous, but to ask God's help. Come, not to debate a proposition, but to seek a PRESENCE."

There's a wonderful example of this "oneness" of Christian believers in Scott Peck's book, *The Different Drum*". There's a message here for all of us.

This story concerns a monastery that had fallen on very hard times. They were "down" to the last five old monks....the Abbot and four brothers, all of them well up in years. In the woods near this monastery was a hut that from time to time was visited by a Rabbi from a near-by town. One day the Abbot felt led to seek out the Rabbi for his advice for the dying monastery.

The Rabbi responded that he had no advice to give, but he did leave the Abbot with a strange message. He said, "The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you". And when the Abbot returned to the monastery at the end of that long day, his fellow monks gathered eagerly around the supper table and asked, "What did the Rabbi have to say? What was his advice for us?"

Said the Abbot...."No, he couldn't help us....we just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say just as I was leaving....it was something strange....he said that the Messiah was one of us, but I don't know what he meant by it...."

In the weeks and months that followed, the old monks often relected on that word of the Rabbi...often wondering if there was any possible significance or meaning to the words and advice....

"The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Yes...if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot....he's been our leader for more than a generation.....but then..."

"On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man...why, everyone knows that Brother Thomas is a man of light...."

"Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred. Brother Elred gets so crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he's a thorn in the sides of people, when you look back on it, Brother Elred is virtually always right. Often he's very right! Maybe the Rabbi did mean Brother Elred."

"But surely not Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody...but then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah."

"Of course...the Rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't have possibly meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet, suppose he did. Suppose I am the Messiah. O God - not me. I couldn't be that much for you, could I?"

And as they contemplated in this manner, these old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect that on the off-chance one among them might turn out to be the Messiah. And, on the off, off-chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

But there's more....because the forest in which it was situated was so beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its grounds....to wander along its paths...to sit under its magnificent trees, and every now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to sit and pray and meditate. And as they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the entire atmosphere of the place.

There was something strangely attractive...even compelling...about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to be drawn back to the monastery more frequently to picnic and to play and also to pray. Soon they were bringing their friends and to show them this special place that had a "hold" on their lives. And their friends brought their friends.

And then it started to happen that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks and after a while one asked if he could join them. And then one day another and still another. So, within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and thanks to the Rabbi's gift of insight - a vibrant center of life and of love and of deep spirituality broke through into that little realm.

CLOSING Now, isn't this what the table of Christ is all about? Think of it this way....treating one another as we would treat Christ, if He were here in our midst....even reverencing ourselves as we would Christ.

We are here for two primary reasons. One is to break the "Bread of Life" which is God's WORD to us in Scripture. Second: to break the "Bread of Life"

which is His BODY. Word and Sacrament. Revelation and relationships. This is where humanity and divinity come together and meet. This is WHO we are and WHAT we are all about.

Many there are who long for an Emmaus Road kind of "break through" with God Who has come to us in Christ. I would like to believe that the Risen Christ is among us here and now....and we would pray that He will make Himself known to each of us in the "breaking of the very bread of life - in Word and in Sacrament. T. S. Eliot in The Wasteland speaks of ONE joining us on the path of life, on the walk to Emmaus. Hear his words,

"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, O God, that each of us may feel the presence of our Risen Lord walking beside us in the days of this coming week. Open our eyes that we may see Him at work in those places we go....that we may hear His voice speaking within our hearts.

And now as we break the bread and take the cup, may we feel His nearness....confirming within us those decisions we may be making, forgiving us, too, for that which we have done and also said which was wrong.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming and healing touch. Bless those whom we mention in our prayers. Point out markers on the path we walk to those who may be in danger of losing their way. Speak to us through Your word and through the Sacrament. In the spirit of the Risen Christ we pray. Amen.