

"COMING ALIVE TO CHRIST"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 6, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

As a young child, Helen Keller was imprisoned by her circumstances. 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 Helen Keller it was a gigantic break-through. She now had a name for a familiar experience - water. If this experience had a name, 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...unable to hear, unable to see.

BREAKTHROUGH

Such a breakthrough is always exciting. And such a breakthrough came to two of the disciples of Jesus. Remember it? They were making their way on foot to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were in mourning. Their Master had been crucified. 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.

And they poured out their grief to one another as they walked 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 in the morning and discovered His body was not there. Instead they encountered an angel who said that Jesus was not dead but alive. What could this all mean? Who could have stolen His body from the grave? Now...what should they and the other disciples do?

You'll recall that as they walked and talked between themselves that a stranger came along and joined them in their walk. Breaking in on the conversation, He asked them, "What is it that you are talking about?"

"Could you be the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the tragic events that have taken place there these past few days?" they asked. 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 and 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 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 the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them...and their eyes were opened. It was like the experience 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 and His presence among us. How does it happen? Can it happen to us today? Yes, it can and let me just touch on 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~~ ~~tous~~ 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.

I'm aware, of course, as you are that from time to time the Scriptures come under fire from scholars and from others standing outside the Faith. You may have heard about the lawyer who was presiding over a church meeting. He was used to the normal procedures of a business gathering when the minutes were read and he would affirm their adoption or approval. Well, things were moving along properly in the conduct of the board 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."

It is a shame that many let their daily encounter with the Word slide by. Those who discipline themselves to make daily reading of the Word a part of their lives invariably find themselves drawn closer to the Lord. I believe 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 messages He has for us. The "Bread of life"...the "Word" of God.

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Alexander Solzhenitsyn demonstrated the power of the Word in his book, "One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovich" - a book based on his own prison experience. Ivan notices that one of his fellow prisoners in the Gulag is not broken, and the light in his eyes does not go out, as it seems to in all the other convicts. And this is because each night in his bunk before the glimmering bulb is turned off, this man reverently unfolds some wrinkled pieces of paper that have somehow escaped the censor. On them are copied passages from the Gospels. The Book of Life was the secret of this man's strength and endurance deep in the darkest corner behind the Iron Curtain.

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 spirits 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 WHICH IS HIS BODY

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It is most significant that it was when Jesus took the bread, blessed it and broke it that the disciples knew who He was. Hearts have been touched and moved 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 many..."

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

Fellowship is at the heart of the body of Christ. We are not "Lone Ranger" Christians. Remember that. The communion table is forever a reminder of that.

There's a wonderful example of the "one-ness" of Christian believers in Scott Peck's The Different Drum. It has a message for us here.

This story concerns a monastery that had fallen on hard times. They were "down" to the last five old monks - the Abbot and four brothers, all of them up in years...over 70 in age. 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 Abbott felt led to come to the Rabbi to seek 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. "The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you". When the Abbot returned to the monastery at the end of that day, his fellow monks gathered around the table and asked him, "What did the Rabbi say?" "Did he have any advice to offer?"

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

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered if there was any possible significance or meaning to the rabbi's words...

"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 has been our leader for more than a generation..."

"On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man...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 is a thorn in the sides of people, when you look back on it, Brother Elred is virtually always right. Often 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, the 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.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its grounds, to wander along of its paths, to sit under its trees, and every now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. 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 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, to play and to pray. They began to bring 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. After a while one asked if he could join them. And then 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 - a vibrant center of light, of love and deep spirituality in the realm.

CLOSING Now, isn't this what the Table of Christ is all about? Treating one another as we would treat Christ? Even reverencing ourselves as we would Christ. It's a beautiful story.

We are here for two primary reasons: to break the "bread of life" which is God's Word to us in the Scriptures and to break the "bread of life" which is His body. Word and Sacrament. Revelation and relationships. These are where humanity and divinity come together and meet. This is who we are and what we are all about.

And so today we long for an Emmaus Road kind of experience as we proclaim the Word and as we share together in worship and fellowship with each other.

We know that the Risen Christ is among us and we pray that He will make Himself known to each of us in the "breaking of the Bread of life"..both in Word and Sacrament. Let me close with some lines from T. S. Eliot's "The Waste-land" where he speaks of One joining those on the walk to Emmaus.

"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 we 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. As we ~~break~~ break the bread and drink the cup in this service, may we feel Him speaking within...confirming those decisions that we may be making, forgiving us for that we have done and said which was wrong, strengthenng us, supporting us.

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 at this time. Point our markers on the road of life to those who may have temporarily lost their way.

Speak softly to each of us this hour - through Your Word and through this Sacrament. In the spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.

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