

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter, 6.iv.2008, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bogue, Pennsylvania
Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116: 1-4, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35
Holy Communion, *ELW* - Setting 5

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**Then they told what had happened on the road,
and how he had been made known to them in
the breaking of the bread.**

--Luke 24:35

I know I have shared this little slice of life with you before,
but please permit me to repeat it one more time. After
working to hear and to speak today's Gospel, which is
always the Gospel appointed for this Third Sunday of
Easter, it seems to pertain. I was dressed in my clergy shirt
with the collar still on and standing in the check-out line at
a supermarket on the way home. This is something I try
never to do, not dressed like that, but we needed milk or

some such. The line was moving slowly, as ‘express’ lines usually do, when I could not help overhearing a conversation between two young women standing behind me. I think I was meant to overhear. ‘Well, I believe in God and Jesus, too, but that doesn’t mean I have to go sit in some *church!*’ No, I did not turn around to take advantage of that teaching moment, as I think I was expected to. Someone like our friend, Pastor Ron Peirson, *would most certainly* have taken full advantage of that comment as an invitation to witness through his wonderful gift of humor. I am no Pastor Peirson, as you know, and I was very glad to get through that check-out line and on my way home. But I went home thinking about what she had said, as I still do. Do we Lutherans (ditto for most other Christians) *have* to do the things we do in worship and in our whole life together? If not, then we have really been knocking

ourselves out for nothing, not just since Martin Luther kicked up that row we call the Reformation, but, as we learned in our class on the Apostolic Fathers recently, right from the beginning of Christianity!

Do we have to do all this? By successive acts of our Congregation Council, going all the way back to the ministry of Pastor Hanus, the celebration and reception of Holy Communion has become more and more frequent in this congregation, just as it has throughout the ELCA and in the Lutheran Church worldwide. Our stated practice is to celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of each month, on all major festivals of the Church Year with the exception of Good Friday, and on all Sundays in the liturgical seasons of Advent, Nativity (Christmas), Epiphany, Lent and Easter. Some have asked and continue

to ask, ‘Why do we have to have the Holy Communion Service so often?’

There is nothing wrong with that question or with asking it. The simple answer is, ‘We don’t. We don’t *have* to do anything. We don’t *have* to celebrate and receive Christ in the Holy Eucharist. We don’t *have* to worship, in any form at all, on the Lord’s Day, Sunday, just as we don’t *have* to turn to God regularly in prayer, asking, giving thanks and praising Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We don’t *have* to do any of this to impress God or to make ourselves righteous before Him, for we can do neither. We don’t *have* to approach Christ as often as we are able in His Holy Supper. We don’t *have* to consider returning to the earliest Christian practice and returning to the practice of Catholic and Orthodox Church from which we Lutherans sprang, *unless*

You knew that ‘unless’ was coming. The earliest Christians, two of whom we meet in today’s Gospel, were raised from profound grief to victorious joy as they met and heard the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, and as He blessed and broke the bread at table for them, just as He had done at the institution of His Holy Supper. They met the real, living Christ on the road, in the midst of their lives, *and* at the Table of His Presence, in the elements of His Body and Blood made food and drink for His people. They did not choose to meet Him one place, but not the other. His words burned in their hearts as He heard *their* words, *their* questions, *their* doubts along the dusty way, and so they begged Him to stay with them as the darkness of the night and of the world closed in around them, *and He was there with them and for them*, just as He promised to be, at the Table, at that Table become an Altar because of

the sacrifice of Himself over which He and they gave thanks.

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in Syria, disciple of Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist, believed to the very core of his being that the Christ Who saves us, the Christ Who speaks to us and gives us hope in the midst of our lives, on the road each of us must walk, is also the Christ to Whose Holy Table we are invited in the midst of His family, His congregation, His Church in her wholeness and purity, His *Catholic* Church. For Ignatius, there were two tests of faith that each of us *must* pass if we *want* to belong to Christ, if we *want* with all our hearts to be saved from sin and our appetite for sin and from the power of death over our lives. We must indeed make God's love *incarnate* in our deeds of kindness that are not mere words, being the living Body and Blood of Christ in the world. And, if

Christ is what we *want*, if we freely *want* to stand before the Father now, on the day of judgment and forever in light and in joy, then we *must* be present to Him as He is to us in His true Body and Blood, given and shed for us on the Cross for all time and now present for us, in us and through us at this Altar in *our* time and for tomorrow. Ignatius was absolutely certain and firm on this point, willing to give his life for his teaching, which the LORD permitted him to do before the end of the first Christian century. He had some troublesome people to deal with, people who were all for faith in God, but as a private matter, as a strictly spiritual matter, people who were squeamish at any talk about the Body and Blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, people who also did not like to hear that the Church is the living Body of Christ, the gathering of Christian believers at every level, centered on the Bishop as representing Christ among

us, and extending out through Priests, Deacons and the whole people of God. If they did not like what the Bishop had to say—especially when the Bishop reminded them that Christ’s gift of Himself in the Holy Eucharist is a gift to be received with joy and thanksgiving—they stayed away, and, I am sure, they stopped giving any support to the Church. To try to persuade them, but also to defend his own congregation, Bishop Ignatius warned them that, to deliberately stay away from Christ in His Body and Blood at the Altar, and to teach others to do likewise, was a deadly sin against God’s grace, against the Holy Spirit, against Christ and God the Father Himself, and that it would not go unpunished.

I am no disciple of the Apostles, except in their writings and in faithfulness to the foundation of the Church Christ laid in them. I am no Saint Ignatius. I am no

Bishop. I am hardly even a Priest in fact, but I *am* your Pastor. And I am as certain as I am that you *are* my congregation that *we* are not so far from the days of the Early Church and from the dangers and the call to faith that have marked the Church's life in every age as we might think.

Some there were and some there are who like the idea of God and the name of Christian, but not enough and not in such a way as to be living members of the Body of Christ, tenaciously loyal to the presence of Christ in His people, in the preaching of God's Word and in the life Body and Blood of the Church in the Sacrament of the Altar. Some there were and some there are who are not content with separating themselves from this congregation, but who try to persuade others to do likewise, and who spread bitterness and rumors through the community that is

the primary mission field of this congregation. It is not necessary to name them or to exclude them, for they have made a name for themselves and they will surely have their reward.

But what of the Church in this congregation in the midst of both malicious talk and when confronted with that question, ‘Do you have to do and believe all that?’ She must not forget the language Christ taught His Disciples and the Disciples taught the whole Church. That is the language of God’s Word, the language of the Sacraments, the language of two thousand years of living, Holy Tradition. Do we *have* to receive Christ in His Body and Blood. No, we *cannot wait* to gather and to celebrate the Christ Who walks along the road with us and Who come inside with His whole Church to make our hearts burn within us through His Body and His Blood! Do we *have* to

go to all the trouble to be a congregation of the Church in this place? Yes, *our hearts burn within us* with His love, with forgiveness and mercy many in these hills and dales have never known, an *evangelical* Church in *that* sense, not a community of the perfect but a community of the forgiven. *Yes!* We are *granted the grace* to be His people here, as partners with other communities thus called as well, and we are called to be the community of His Holy Supper through which He strengthens us for His service.

✠Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. ✠Amen.



S. D. G.!