

## The Third Sunday of Easter (April 30, 2017)

*Ps. 116*

*Acts 2:14a, 36-41*

*1 Peter 1:17-23*

*Luke 24:13-35*

The painting on your leaflet covers is the well-known depiction of today's Gospel story, by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Swiss painter Robert Zünd. A reprint of this painting hung in my parents' bedroom as I was growing up. I loved this picture as a boy, especially the highly detailed portrayal of towering oak trees; the realistic touch of a culvert under the dirt road; the faint outline of a city in the hazy distance.

This painting has colored my personal imagery of this Gospel story ever since; but this year, a new phrase in this story has captured my imagination. It is a phrase of passion, of excitement, of vivid imagery: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us? *Were not our hearts b u r n i n g within us?*”

The phrase suggests being fascinated with something, or being irresistably drawn to something, without quite being able to put your finger on the reason. Indeed, this is, in a phrase, perhaps the most apt description of my spirituality that I can think of. When I had rejected the fundamentalism of my upbringing while at university and become an intellectual skeptic of all religion, I nevertheless retained a fascination for things ecclesiastical and things spiritual. I continued to pursue a degree in sacred music, and never missed a Sunday service, despite my theological wrestlings. Why was this? I think, because, though my intellect could not fully accept the tenets of orthodoxy, my heart still occasionally burned within me – like when I heard music within the context of worship, or when I walked into a Medieval church. My head doubted, but my heart still burned – for what I wasn't quite sure; but it did – and it wasn't just acid reflux.

Last week's Gospel saw the Apostle Thomas not being willing to believe that the resurrection had taken place unless or until he had physical proof of it. In this week's Gospel, by contrast, we are presented with persons who, even though they saw the risen Christ *with their own eyes*, and heard him speak *with their ears*, did **not** comprehend, did **not** apprehend. Hours passed in company with this stranger – and not just a stranger who happened to be quietly present, but a stranger who occupied their whole attention, whose discourse caused their hearts to burn within them. They listened, and responded, and queried, and looked into the eyes of Jesus – even as they spoke *of* him in light of recent events – yet they did not *see* him. They did not apprehend that this was he.

Yet – their hearts burned within them all the while; and the burning was not recognized for what it was until after Jesus had departed from them. Then they recognized that the sensation of burning hearts had been significant – had, indeed, indicated the true nature of this stranger, when their physical senses were unable to make the identification. It turned out, they reflected afterwards, that their senses had failed them, yet their hearts had been crying out the truth all along.

At the conclusion of last week's Thomas story, the author of John's Gospel writes this: "Now Jesus did many other signs . . . which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." Note that phrase, "these are written ***so that*** you may come to believe."

I think it may be a characteristic of the ancient, pre-scientific, world that miracles were proof of the truth of something. Signs and wonders were the evidence that something was "for real." They were seemingly what was required to prove that something was not only true, but important. I believe that many of the miracles of the Gospels – from the Star of Bethlehem and the virgin birth,

right through to the resurrection itself – were put in the Gospels in order to make people pay attention, in order to “prove” the specialness of Jesus, and the truth of their claims. No ancient god was devoid of wondrous stories about him; so Jesus, the first Christians thought, should also have such stories.

Well, I must admit that I am skeptical of miracles. I tend to identify with another doubting Thomas – Thomas Jefferson – in finding the miracles of the Bible difficult to stomach. Jefferson famously created his own version of the Gospels, removing everything supernatural and miraculous, and retaining only the wisdom and sayings of Jesus, and the account of his death. I suppose I am with Jefferson in that my Enlightenment, scientific approach to truth disallows the supernatural. In direct contrast to the ancient mind, the presence of miracles in a story makes me *less* inclined to believe it than *more*.

Indeed, what is compelling to me about Christianity is *not* that Jesus performed miracles, or that he was born of a virgin, or even that he rose from the dead. In fact, most of these are impediments to my faith rather than otherwise. What is attractive, and even persuasive, about Christianity is more its story of sanctification of the physical world through the notion of God becoming man. That the Divine, which is usually seen as all-powerful, actually humbled itself to become one with humankind; that it gave up its power, and even suffered and died, and allowed itself to be utterly defeated at the hands of the creation that it sought to redeem with its love. That the Divine nature is about turning the other cheek, not getting even. This seeming contradiction – this utter weakness; this surrendering of power; this meekness in the face of arrogance – THIS is what persuades me that Jesus is a man worth following, and Christianity a way of life worth living, rather than some show of muscular power in smiting the heathen, or turning water into wine, or healing the blind, all in a bravura attempt to win my heart through a display of power. And is it not noteworthy in today’s Gospel that the disciples finally recognize Jesus, not

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through a miracle or any commanding display that would astound them, but through the mundane act of breaking bread, and serving them.

And I think it is this contradiction of a God who chooses love over power; who chooses to suffer rather than causing suffering; a God, as the Collect goes, “whose property is always to have mercy;” that causes my heart to continue to burn within me when I contemplate spirituality, even when my intellect prevents me from acceding to the more militant claims of Christianity. In fact, just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, it is the burning of their hearts that is a truer indication of the presence of the Divine in their midst, than what their physical senses could apprehend. It is the burning of my heart as I make or listen to music; the burning of my heart as I contemplate what it is to be holy; the burning of my heart when I apprehend beauty, that is – *perhaps* – the truest indication of a Divine presence in my life. And perhaps it is the burning of our collective hearts as we worship and pray and sing, as we reach out to the homeless, as we break bread together – both here at the altar and below in the undercroft – that is the truest indication of a Divine presence in our life together as the community of St. Andrew’s.