



EASTER

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 8, 2012

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Lection – Luke 24:28-50 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 28) As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. (v. 29) But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. (v. 30) When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. (v. 31) Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. (v. 32) They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (v. 33) That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. (v. 34) They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” (v. 35) Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. (v. 36) While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” (v. 37) They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. (v. 38) He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? (v. 39) Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” (v. 40) And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. (v. 41) While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” (v. 42) They gave him a piece of broiled fish, (v. 43) and he took it and ate in their presence. (v. 44) Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” (v. 45) Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, (v. 46) and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, (v. 47) and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (v. 48) You are witnesses of these things. (v. 49) And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on

high.” (v. 50) Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Easter is often characterized as the highest holy day of the Christian liturgical calendar. The moment marks the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Historic socio-economic and political oppression make Easter a particularly prominent moment in the African American church tradition. Many churches will do a special cleaning of the church to prepare for Easter Sunday. Pulpits will be lined with Easter lilies, altars and crosses will be adorned with white vestments, choirs will rehearse special music, children will dress up for Easter pageants and prepare special speeches, liturgical dancers will minister in worship, and an Easter play or skit may even accompany the preaching moment. Liturgy is highlighted by high praise and celebratory preaching about a God who triumphs over the grave. For people who know what it means to bear sorrow and sadness, the resurrected Christ is evidence that trouble does not have the final word and new life is possible. To paraphrase Dr. Frederick Haynes III: This liturgical moment reminds us that the Gospel of the Resurrection is Good News. When the forces of death declare “the end,” Jesus victoriously responds, “to be continued!” “We may live in a ‘Good Friday World,’ but we walk by an ‘Easter faith.’”¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 24:28-50

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As a young child, I looked forward to Easter as the occasion to be adorned in my Sunday best. To this day, I still have a picture of myself in my white hat, wearing my new Easter dress with all of its frills. Just four years old, my hands were on my hips and I was ready to walk the runway! This was the “stuff” of Easter to me as a young child.

However, this expression of Easter should not obscure its deeper meaning. For followers of Christ, Easter is more than just style. Easter is both style and substance. We can choose to put on our Sunday best on Easter because in spite of the scars and suffering born from a Good Friday world, in the words of Ceilie in the book The Color Purple, “we are still here.” This is the substance of our Easter faith and this is good news. Considering the practice of our criminal justice system in the state-sanctioned execution of Troy Davis, the cradle to prison pipeline, and the oppressive powers that have given rise to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street Movement, the resurrection of Jesus underscores the Christian hope that the powers of destruction do not ultimately have the final word. Easter is the promise that inspires us to put on our clothes “and tell the story of how we made it over.”²

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Luke 24:28-50 is a resurrection narrative rich with a range of themes and several areas of focus for the interpreter. Particularly significant is Jesus' closing imperative that the disciples stay in the city until they have been clothed with power from on high.

The imperative is noteworthy because there is another power in the backdrop of the narrative. The power of the Roman Empire is a destructive force, invested in control and domination even at the expense of life. Rome is "the purveyor of a tyrannical system that threatens both human and cosmic life. It is a killer creature with a malevolent instinct to destroy anything that fails to worship its nature and participate in its political and economic exploitation."³ Jesus threatened the power of the empire because he is the one who proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom to the oppressed, and recovery of sight to the blind (Luke 4:18-19). This subversive way is radically rebellious to the power of the empire and eventually leads to his death.

It is this pervasive destructive power that also contributes to the disciples' despair in the passage. For the disciples, Jesus' death signaled the demise of dreams and the hushing of hopes. It leaves them grief-stricken on the road to Emmaus. The sense of loss would be with them as they gather in the Jerusalem room too. In this context, a resurrected Jesus comes to meet despairing disciples with a greeting of peace (v. 36). To prove his resurrection triumph, he encourages the disciples to check his scars and to share a meal with him. This physical appearance of Jesus is a historical and theological exclamation point that Almighty God, not Rome, is the power that reigns supreme. Yet dreams of a future in which God will rule in truth and justice are still in tension with the present realities of the empire.

So if the disciples are indeed to be witnesses of God's alternative future, Jesus tells them that they will need to be "clothed with power from on high" (v. 49). The reference to God as the one who is on "high" is not atypical to Luke (see 1:32, 1:35, 1:76, 2:14, 6:35, 19:38).

Power from on high has its source in God and is therefore ultimate power to act in life-giving and life-affirming ways. To witness to the living Christ in the face of destructive powers (death-dealing powers), Jesus is clear that the disciples will need to "*clothe*" themselves in this life-giving power. In this tradition, the Apostle Paul speaks about putting on the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:11). Just as construction workers put on their boots and police officers put on their vests, just as doctors put on their scrubs and preachers put on their robes, Easter witnesses need to dress themselves in a wardrobe that equips them for the journey ahead. And the passage offers at least two tasks for which Easter witnesses need to be clothed in power from on high.

One of the tasks for which power from on high is necessary is the task of *extending prophetic invitation*. The pericope has much to say about hospitality. Jesus is met as a stranger on the road to Emmaus and is invited into an intimate space. A meal is shared, and in this exchange, the stranger-guest becomes the host, blessing, breaking, and distributing the bread (v. 30). In this moment of table fellowship, the disciples' "eyes were open" (v. 31) and they recognize the living Christ.

By inviting the “stranger” into an intimate space and sharing together, the living Christ is experienced. This is a prophetic act because the invitation is contrary to the powers that divide, exploit, exclude, discriminate, and dominate. It is the demand that we practice inclusion and has implications for the way in which we approach mission and evangelism, and it has implications for the way in which we approach immigration, children, youth, and LGBT persons in our community. We may do well to heed a call to expand our community through a prophetic invitation. The point is well taken on Easter Sunday in which many churches will see more visitors than any other time in the year. In addition, the decline of the mainline church in North America may be well curbed, perhaps resurrected with new life, if we practiced this kind of prophetic invitation. It is a “power from on high” initiative, disrupting the xenophobic power of the empire and echoing the scriptural charge to “show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

Another work of the Easter witness is to *practice prophetic imagination*. This is the task of discovering meaning, hope, and promise in tragic times. The crucifixion was a tool to terrorize and dishearten subversive sensibility and activity. It had done so to the disciples as they walked on the Emmaus road and as they gathered in Jerusalem after the crucifixion. However, Jesus makes sense of the tragedy from the perspective of Scripture which included the reality of the cross but also the promise of resurrection (vv. 45-48). It is Jesus’ recounting of Scripture’s sacred narrative that causes the disciples’ hearts to go from broken to burning (v. 32). The powers of the empire present an incomplete story. In telling the whole story of the cross, Jesus takes a tool meant to serve the empire, and turns it against the empire.⁴ With power from on high, Easter witnesses are able to proclaim the story too. Through an encounter with the resurrected Jesus, we can see the work of God even in suffering and we are able to point the eyes of the hopeless and the discouraged to the working hand of God.

Celebration

Destructive powers of the world do not write the final chapter in the book of Life. Jesus’ resurrection is evidence that God has another ending. This is good news because in the world’s chapter, we were exiled and excluded. But in Jesus’ chapter we are invited and included. In the world’s chapter we were beaten, broken, defeated, and counted out. But in Jesus’ chapter, we are counted in! And because of what Jesus has done and what we have witnessed, we’ve moved from having broken hearts to burning hearts. With hearts aflame, we must journey on! Clothed with power from on high, we will work together and work with God toward a different future!

The promise is sure. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

- Sights:** The Emmaus road; gathered friends; table fellowship; mealtime; bread; fish; the scarred hands and feet of Jesus; the look of joy upon seeing the risen Savior; lifted hands; clothes; the resurrected Christ standing among the disciples; the city of Bethany;
- Colors:** The gray houses in the village; the light wood table at which they broke bread; the white bread;
- Sounds:** Conversations of gathered friends; discussion at the table; sighing, gasping, stunned silence; teaching; preaching; city activity; and
- Smells:** The smell of freshly cooked fish, just-baked bread, and other meal elements.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

Recommended Reading:

(Sridhar, put in this book cover.)

Pinn, Anthony. Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003.

Notes

1. Haynes, Frederick, III. 2010 Easter Lection.
www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=142
2. These lyrics quoted by the lection writer are part of the spiritual, "I'm gonna put on my robe and tell the story how I made it over..."
3. Blount, Brian. Can I Get a Witness: Reading Revelation through African American Culture. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. p. 32.
4. Interview with Dr. Mark Taylor, Professor of Theology and Culture. Online location: <http://www.rutherford.org/Oldspeak/Articles/Interviews/oldspeak-MarkTaylor.html> accessed 11 November 2011.