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Easter 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Faith to Travel By”

Text: Luke 24:13-35

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's Sunday night, the Sunday of His resurrection, and Jesus joins two disciples and walks with them as they make their way to the village of Emmaus. He doesn't require a packed church, or a crowded stadium, to appear – two traveling pilgrims will do. The Good Shepherd goes after His lost and wandering sheep. And He goes with them. For how long? Probably a couple of hours! Not a short time! He didn't have to, you know. He could have pulled up right along side of them, revealed Himself to them *right away* – His glory, the nail prints, and all of that – and done it much faster; and much more efficiently. And then He could have been done with it, and appeared to more people too!

But He doesn't. He spends the time. Hours. Asking questions. Talking. And what a comfort. To show such patience, and kindness, and gentleness. Not giving them just one chance, and then throwing up His hands in exasperation and saying, “*You ignorant buffoons just aren't going to get it, are you?*” No. He doesn't have something better to do. He doesn't have only a short time to squeeze them into His busy schedule. He wants to be there, with His poor, sinful, confused, struggling, doubting, upside-down, fearful, anxious disciples. He wants to spend the time. It is important. And it shows us His heart. And I know how comforting that is to this poor disciple [*pointing to myself!*], who *often* doesn't “get it” for a long time!

But that doesn't answer **the why?** **Why** does Jesus use so much time? **Why** doesn't He reveal Himself faster and more efficiently? **Why** does He make these two disciples wrestle a bit first, and struggle to understand? **Why** does He hide Himself?

Before answering that, take note that that is *often* how God works. As we read through the Scriptures, we see this struggle of faith happening time and time again. Jesus takes His time going to the house of Jairus, whose daughter is sick, so that she dies before He gets there. (Lk 8) The same with His friend Lazarus – it takes Him over four days to get there. (Jn 11) God makes Jacob wrestle with Him all night long before giving him a blessing in the morning. (Gen 32) And the Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus seeking a blessing,

Jesus first seems to reject by calling her a dog! (Mt 15) And I could mention many more stories like this. **But why?** Why does God hide Himself, or delay, or even seem against us, before He reveals Himself to us and blesses us?

And so the Emmaus disciples are left to wrestle – with the faith, with their understanding, with their fears. For hours. ***“We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”*** It was now the third day, when *He said* it was all going to happen! But nothing has happened. There was no grand and glorious appearing, just the hysterical ravings of some women and the rumors of His body being stolen. And so their hopes had crashed down. It was time to go home, and re-evaluate.

And Jesus lets them struggle – not to the point of despair – but so that it may be of good to them. **So that their faith may rest where it needs to be – in Christ and His Word alone.** So that their faith may not be in what they think Jesus should do, and what they think He should be. So that their faith would not be in a restored earthly kingdom, or in a grand and glorious appearing of Christ on earth now. But that they cling to His Word. That they cling to His promises. That they cling to Him, even when it seems the very opposite is happening.

For that is the kind of faith we need, and the kind of faith that Jesus wants to give. A faith that not only is there in the good times, but a faith that will endure also in the bad times, the times of struggle, and even the times of darkness and death. . . . And so Jesus lets them struggle, for their hope and faith had been misplaced. Their own words and thoughts and hopes had replaced God’s Word and hope. And that false hope and faith needs to be killed, that true faith and hope may be given. Faith with Christ alone and His Word as its object.

And so Jesus teaches them. Had the Christ promised them an earthly kingdom? Did He say that what they were expecting was going to happen? Or did He not rather say that ***“it was necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”***

And then what about your and me today? And people in our world today? Where is our hope and faith? Is it not often misplaced as well? Despite our best intentions. It’s so easy, and the temptations to do so are many and great. To put our faith and hope in success or popularity or recognition – that if St. Athanasius grows, God is pleased; and if not, then God is not pleased. Or to put our faith and hope in feelings or healing – that if I have faith I should always feel happy, and not worry; or that if God approves of me he’ll heal me and protect me. Or to put our faith in our own strength, or in things, or in people,

or in prayers answered the way we want, or in how easy our life goes. That these are indicators of God approval and favor. . . . And then do we not doubt when things get rough, when they aren't going just as we want or think, when the things of this world that we have put our faith in let us down? Do we not then sound like the Emmaus disciples? ***But we had hoped . . . We thought . . .*** But is that what God said?

And so God hides Himself, delays, and even seems against us – to cut us to the heart! To kill our misplaced faith, and give us true faith. To kill our misplaced faith, so that we turn to Him because we have no where else to turn! So that our faith will have nothing to rely on but Him, and His Word and promises. Not glory, not pleasure, nothing but Him. Only His Word. His Word of forgiveness. His Word which is truth, and which will never let us down.

And so it must be, as long as we live in this life, in this world.

And then the two disciples, their false faith having been killed by the Word, and true faith given and strengthened, ask Him to stay. Abide with us. The very thing, in fact, Jesus wants to do. And ***“when he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight.”*** And even though He vanished, they were not sad. For they now knew He was not gone. Their faith was no longer in seeing or in glory, but in the Word. In His promises. And so they arise that very hour and return to Jerusalem. No longer confused, but certain. No longer sad, but joyful. No longer struggling, but on the firm foundation.

And so too with us. For the Good Shepherd has come and found each of us lost and wandering sheep, and has invited us here, to His house, a refuge for weary pilgrims. And He stays with us. For to be with us is the very thing that Jesus wants to do. And so He is herewith us, giving us His Word and teaching us. Killing our misplaced faith and then giving us the faith we need. Hearing our confession, and forgiving us our doubts and fears. Opening the Scriptures to us, that we see Him in them, and know, and believe. And then inviting us to stay and eat at His Table, where He is both host and food. And as we come, we recognize Him here in the breaking of bread and the cup of wine. For in fact it is not mere bread and wine, but his body and blood. The same body and blood He gave on the night in which He was betrayed, the same body and blood He gave on the cross, is the same body and blood that is here for us today.

And our eyes are opened. And though we cannot see Him, we know He is not gone. For our faith is not in seeing or in glory, but in His Word. In His promises.

And so as at Emmaus, and as in the early church, so it is for us here. Scripture and Supper. Teaching and Table fellowship. Word and Sacrament. The Divine Service of our Saviour for us, here for us poor, sinful, confused, struggling, doubting, upside-down, fearful, anxious disciples every Sunday. Every Sunday, a little Easter, as we travel this life. As we travel to our homes, to our jobs, to our friends and neighbors. Traveling, but never alone. Traveling, but always by faith. Traveling, as the ancient collect says, *“not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us.”*

Until we reach the end of our journey. The darkness and night of death. Then the house we will enter and stay will be our Saviour’s. And by faith strengthened by Christ on the journey, and faith only in Him, you will enter. And you will see Him and recognize Him. Face to face. But then He will not vanish from your sight. For at the end of our journey is the day that will never end. There will be no night, nor night of death or separation. Only the joy of our Saviour’s presence. With us forever. The very place He wants to be.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.