

04/30/2017 ~ Third Sunday of Easter ~ \*Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35.

### *Explaining Scripture*

“They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while Jesus was talking to us on the road, explaining the Scripture to us?’” — Luke 24:32.

In my first year as pastor here I was asked this question: “When we recite a creed in the service, I’ve noticed you always use the Nicene Creed. Why don’t you use the Apostles’ Creed?”

“Well,” I explained, “as far as anyone can tell, no Apostle had any hand in or even heard of the Apostles’ Creed. It was written a long, long time after the Apostles were alive and actually a long, long time after the Nicene Creed was composed.” (Slight pause.)

Let me unpack that a little. The earliest trace of anything called the Apostles’ Creed happened nearly 700 years after the Resurrection, sometime around the year 710 of the Common Era. Further, the first written trace of the Apostles’ Creed is found in what we today call France.

Now as to why the Apostles’ Creed spread and became popular, the Emperor

Charlemagne had a significant impact on that. Charlemagne ruled the Holy Roman Empire, as it was called, from the year 800 to 814 of the Common Era. Despite the fact that it was only about 100 years old at that point— perhaps Charlemagne didn't know that— the Emperor insisted the Apostles' Creed be used throughout the Empire.

Thereby, the Apostles' Creed became widely used in the West. That's not a surprise since the Apostles' Creed is a product of Europe, a product of the West. But it has never been used in liturgical practice in Eastern Orthodox Churches. And that's not a surprise either since Eastern Orthodox Churches were largely outside of Charlemagne's influence.

Now, as to why one might use the Nicene Creed rather than the Apostles' Creed, the answer is simple given the history I just recited. And, to elaborate on the Nicene Creed a little, it was composed by a church council which met in the city of Nicaea in what is modern day Turkey.

This happened in the year 325 of the Common Era. It was the first unified Church Council ever and this creed is used in both the church in the East and the church in the West. Further, the Nicene Creed is the only Creed ever sanctioned by any council of the church. (Slight pause.)

So, why bring up all this about church creeds? Well, toward the end of today's Gospel reading we hear a very interesting statement. The two travelers who have encountered Jesus return to where the disciples are gathered and hear these words:

“Christ has risen! It is true! Jesus has appeared to Simon!” These words from Luke reflect what Paul writes about thirty years *before* Luke is composed.

And what Paul records is what some call the earliest Creed of the church because these words probably pre-date even Paul’s writings. Paul says Christ was (quote:) “...buried and..., on the third day, Christ was raised in accordance with the Scriptures and... was seen by Cephas— Peter...”— part of an early record in the writings of Paul and exactly what we hear in Luke. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as Luke: “They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while Jesus was talking to us on the road, explaining the Scripture to us?’” (Slight pause.)

I need to make an obvious statement. We live in the year 2017 of the Common Era. Sometimes that gets in our way when we try to understand stories which were written 2,000 years ago.

You see, when we hear the question, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there...?” our brains can play a little bit of a trick on us. One reaction might be ‘did this person not buy the newspaper and read the headlines that morning?’ As I am sure you realize, there were no newspapers.

Further, estimates of the population in Jerusalem run anywhere from a low of 20,000 to a high of more than 1,000,000. The most credible of these estimates run in the range of 100,000.

But this was also the Passover season, so it's likely many, many pilgrims were in town because of that. So for sake of argument, let's put the estimated population of Jerusalem this time at about 150,000.

My point is, especially with a population that large, news did not travel with any speed at all in ancient times. So, one might start to wonder why that question about 'did you not hear what happened' is even in this story.

That would not have spread. Why ask that question? You see, that someone might have heard this among a population this large in Biblical times just stretches credulity. And, therefore, one might, I certainly do, start to ask, "what is really going on here with this story?" or "What is this story getting at?"

I need follow all that up with yet another statement, but this one is less than obvious. The manuscript from which these words are taken depicts the village of Emmaus as being some seven miles from Jerusalem. Other ancient manuscripts say Emmaus is twenty miles out from Jerusalem.

However, Biblical historians have never been able to find any ancient town with the name Emmaus. Further, there does not even seem to be any hidden meaning in the name. Its likely meaning is "warm spring." So the name is completely innocuous.

I think all this information again prompts me to ask questions like, "where is this story trying to lead us?" "What is it trying to tell us?"

Well, that's when I turn to the phrase that says Jesus explained Scripture to these

travelers. More specifically, what does it mean that Jesus explained Scripture (quote:)

“...beginning with Moses and all the prophets,...”? (Slight pause.)

I need to make one more obvious statement. The only Scripture Jesus knew is what we call the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament.

And for those who first heard or read this story, the words used here— ‘Moses and all the prophets’— would have had a very specific meaning. When the word Moses was used referring to Scripture in ancient times people took it to mean the *Torah*, the Pentateuch— the Book of Moses. Add the Prophets to that and what do you have? The only Scripture Jesus knew.

And what does the *Torah* and the Prophets— the Hebrew Scripture— the only Scripture Jesus knew, say? The Hebrew Scripture insists God loves us and God wants to be in covenant with us. (Slight pause.)

Now I suppose you have noticed over time that I often speak about the covenant of God. Why would I concentrate on covenant so much? Well here’s one thing. Scholars tell us there are at least 12 signs of the covenant in the Hebrew Scripture— signs of the covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, with the Priests.

And again, what does that covenant in Hebrew Scripture say? It says God loves us and wants to be in covenant with us. That is what the Hebrew Scripture— the only Bible Jesus knew— is about. That’s it; that’s all; case closed— covenant. (Slight

pause.)

Now, I can hear the skeptical among you say what Jesus explained had to do with the Messiah. And that is not about covenant. My take on this is simple. The resurrected Jesus is yet another a sign of the covenant.

Why do I say the resurrected Jesus is a sign of the covenant? Here's one reason right from this reading. (Quote:) "Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them."

When we celebrate Communion still today the words we use insist the meal is a sign of the covenant. (Quote:) "This cup is the new covenant— *the new covenant.*"

(Slight pause.)

All that brings me back to statements of faith, what we commonly called creeds. I maintain statements of faith are not a list of what we believe, although many people take them that way. Rather, I say statements of faith are a description of God, which is not a list of what we believe. It is a description of God.

Now, if you ask me what I believe, this is what I say: God loves us and wants to covenant with us. And I believe the resurrected Jesus is a glorious sign of that covenant.

(Slight pause.)

There is one more layer here. One needs to ask the question, 'What does covenant mean?' Covenant means God loves us unconditionally.

And what does unconditional love mean? Unconditional love encompasses

forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, freedom, equity.

So, I want to suggest covenant—this forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, freedom, equity and love— in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament— are central to Who God is. Therefore, I praise God from Whom all the blessings of covenant— these blessings of forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, freedom, equity and love— flow.

Indeed, praise God. Amen.

04/30/2017

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “There is, unquestionably, a difference between Eastern thought and Western thought. Western thought gets into explaining things, delving into detail. Eastern thought tends to look at the an experience as opposed to explaining it. It could also be said Christianity is an Eastern religion which we Westerners try to explain using Western philosophy. Perhaps we would be wise to concentrate on the experience of God’s forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, freedom, equity and love.”

BENEDICTION: Let us serve the world in the name of Christ. Let the love of Christ find

expression in us. And may we love God so much, that we love nothing else too much.

May we be so in awe of God, that we are in awe of no one else and nothing else. Amen.