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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday of Easter
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Lectionary Year A: Luke 24:13-35

Some of us are slow learners. Speaking personally, it has taken me years to cease being baffled, frustrated, and angered by things that, in my opinion, didn't make any sense. Had I learned years ago that there will always be things that don't make sense, I would've spent the last several decades as a much happier person.

Perhaps one of the finest arts to master, then, is the balance between accepting nonsense and doing something about it. As a child of the 1980s, I distinctly remember a song by Bruce Hornsby that was on heavy rotation back then; its chorus went "That's just the way it is...some things will never change." The sentiment in that refrain echoed a sense of resignation to America's social ills -- inequality, injustice, racism, and so on. That's "just the way it is," so why bother trying to do anything about these problems?

Since becoming (wink wink) older and wiser, I have learned to choose my battles more carefully, but, if we look back in history, it would appear that -- to use a common example -- the Civil Rights Movement was not echoing refrains of "that's just the way it is." I could hardly see Martin Luther King standing in front of a crowd and telling people to accept their current circumstances indefinitely. This wouldn't have created a movement of great social change. Today, however, we are quicker to sense that our arms are tied behind our backs and less optimistic about our ability to effect change. Years ago, I would've accused us of complacency, but today I'd diagnose it as weariness.

Again, cast into a personal light, I would admit that I've learned these lessons slowly -- and with that came what you might call an admission of the obvious. I admitted...finally...that I didn't have all the answers. But if you need any further evidence that I'm a slow learner -- or at least slow to figure things out -- stop and talk to me on one of the occasions on which the antiquated conveyance I happen to be piloting has left me sitting on the side of the highway!

But I also proudly join the multitudes of slow learners who have gone before, including those who followed Jesus up to his death and encountered him after his resurrection. Even those closest to Jesus couldn't wrap their heads around a Messiah who would suffer and die. It just didn't make sense to them.

Two more baffled individuals, one named Cleopas, unknowingly encounter the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. Their thoughts are no different from the widespread expectation of who the Messiah was to be. Here are their exact words: "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place" (Luke 24:21).

The prevailing expectation was clear: The Messiah would redeem Israel through his great strength. But then came the reality -- Jesus assumed a position of weakness and vulnerability, going so far as to let himself be crucified next to common criminals. This was not the triumphant blaze of glory that everyone wanted.

But Jesus doesn't hesitate to point out their error; he says, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26).

Those who are, ahem, slow of heart can't learn even when the facts are as plain as day before them. But that doesn't mean they're hopeless. Rather, they might simply need a visual aid or illustration.

Cleopas and the other person with him do finally "get" who Jesus is. It all happens in an event that seems suspiciously similar to the Eucharist. The text recalls: "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him..." (Luke 24:30-31a).

You see, there are multitudes of things that may baffle, frustrate, or anger us, but we can take comfort in the knowledge that, when Christ comes to us, our eyes can be opened and we can understand. Within the Anglican tradition, we have, for the most part, learned that it is very fitting at every Sunday worship gathering to receive Christ in the Eucharist, for this is the very same eye-opening meal that Christ shared with two people who initially didn't recognize him. And he comes to us today in all his flesh-and-blood reality as host of this Easter feast.

Moreover, please know that your faith -- while never a complete antidote to questions and confusion -- seeks understanding. You want to know who God is and what God is up to. For this, you can read the Scriptures, pray, come to worship, and receive the Body and Blood of our crucified and risen Lord. These are the means by which you can see and attempt to comprehend the Almighty. Even if you're like me -- a bit of a slow learner -- you still have "illustrations" and "visual aids" in the means of grace themselves...like preaching, the Sacraments, reflections on Scripture, and the like.

We know, too, that Christ calls us to witness to the redemption he brings to the world. Some folks choose to do that in rather conspicuous ways, like those who stand up at football games with "John 3:16" painted on tag board. Others do so with great subtlety and little fanfare, with their presence among others in times of need or by mending relationships that were long thought broken. All of these examples, though, are evidence of the sort of eye-opening impact that Christ has had on their lives.

They've learned something. They know what it means to be a Christian. They understand.

And so the call is issued to all of us -- that we participate in Christ's work. Know that, as Christians, we hear Christ -- who is the Healer of our every ill -- calling us to be a part of the healing that he would want for every person. Whatever ways in which our eyes can be opened and our understanding increased will only help us accomplish that goal more effectively.

Despite also what our weary souls might compel us to do, let us refuse to repeat Bruce Hornsby's refrain, "That's just the way it is."

God has given us Jesus Christ, his crucified and risen Son, to walk with us and mend our brokenness, but we need him here among us in order that we may understand not only who he is but what he has called us to do. In our Gospel text, it seems as if Cleopas and his companions had no problem figuring that out (a refreshing change), as we read, "They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'" (Luke 24:34).

They witnessed! And all they had to say was "The Lord has risen indeed."

Yes, there will always be things that will baffle, frustrate, or anger us, but we can nonetheless count on the presence of the risen Christ to bring understanding to our troubled minds. We just need to seek him, for in so doing, we seek understanding. Seek him in the Eucharist, in prayer, and in your neighbor (particularly the one who doesn't have it so good). There your eyes will be opened!

And the nice thing is he has already sought and found you. Responding to his call, therefore, is as easy as coming forward to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, just as it is offered today. You can go forth -- eyes opened, understanding increased, and lesson learned.

Best of all, slow learners need not feel ashamed here!

Amen.