

FROM WILDERNESS TO WELCOME

Luke 24: 13-35

Conference Annual Meeting

17 May 2001

Mary Susan Gast

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

[Isa 55: 2]

It was Easter Sunday. But nobody knew it yet. The tomb was empty. But nobody had unscrambled the numbers yet, nobody had put together two facts here plus two promises there and come up with Bingo! Resurrection!!

Most all of the disciples were probably stumbling around in that fog of disbelief, that haze of grief, that beclouds our senses, muffles our hearts, and weighs down our bodies just after someone we love has died. No surprise, then, that these two disciples were heading home. They'd had it. Cleopas and one unnamed. [Let's assume, because the other disciple is unnamed, that she's a woman; let's assume, because they're heading home, that the other disciple is Mary, who we know is married to Cleopas]—Cleopas and Mary had stayed around Jerusalem until the ordeal of Jesus' crucifixion was over. Until Jesus was buried. They waited in Jerusalem for three days, the embers of hope still glowing: maybe Jesus *was* the redeemer; maybe, somehow, he *will* turn out to be our saviour. The tomb, they have heard, was found empty just this morning. No body. Ransacked? Mary and Cleopas are at best bewildered, at worst despairing. It's time to go home.

Along that dusty road from Jerusalem to Emmaus they're talking and talking. Intense conversation. Trying to make sense of it all. So focused on the soul-wrenching events of the past few days, that they don't even notice this stranger coming up behind them as they walk. They are totally unaware when Jesus falls in beside them, keeping pace with them. It was, after all, Easter Sunday. But they didn't know it, yet.

They didn't know it yet. Their eyes shrouded with sorrow, they didn't recognize Jesus when they saw him. Their spirits soggy with pain, they *answered* his tender and insightful invitation to talk about what was troubling them, but they weren't engaged, they weren't responding to *Jesus*, just to some stranger. Weary with lamentation, they were too sluggish to even react when

Jesus slammed them, called them fools, faithless! Their minds choked with tears, they didn't even get it when Jesus led them in on-the-spot Bible study. It was Easter Sunday. But Cleopas and Mary didn't have a clue.

Now the sun is beginning to set. They've been walking for seven miles. They're near home. Maybe it was the theological discourse, maybe just the ingrained training in hospitality but Mary and Cleopas are roused a bit from their deadened emotional state. They realize that this stranger is miles from any possible destination city and they know it's not safe to be out on the road at night so they invite him to stay the night with them. The cosmic tables were turning, there, you know, creaking into a new position as these two hospitable humans sought to give comfort to the One who had created them. But there they were, anticipating Jim Manley's hymnology, saying "Come in, come in and sit down. You are a part of the family. We are lost and we are found. We are all part of the family."

"So he went in to stay with them," we read. "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." The numbers tallied in a nanosecond. The three bunches of grapes appeared in a row on the slot machine. It all added up. It's Easter! Tell everyone!!

Oh, sure, *now* they say their hearts were burning within them when Jesus first talked to them, when he explained the scriptures to them. *Now* they say that. Now they can look *back* and say that. But the simple, mighty, and unassailable truth of it is, until they sat around that table and broke bread with Jesus, Cleopas and Mary had been oblivious, preoccupied, virtually clueless.

Jesus had been their companion all along. He walked with them, just as he has walked with each of us, from the frightening into the unknown. From salvation into faithfulness. From death into new life. He has been our companion all along.

Companion. The word, you know, comes from "com" meaning "with," and "pane"—"bread." "Bread fellow," as my dictionary put it. "Someone who eats the same bread." Compañera.

Companion. Companionship. Here is the source of food for the journey. Food that comes to us as we travel along the dusty road from Jerusalem to Emmaus,

from the frightening into the unknown, from death into new life, from the wilderness to the welcome table. The food is smack in the middle of the company. Not a morsel. Not a crumb. But sustenance.

“Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” the Psalmist asks. [78: 19] Oh, yes, when our ancestors were set free from their captors in Egypt, “The Most High rained down manna upon them to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven.”

The people of Israel were on a journey then, from the terrors of slavery into the howling unknown. Forty years along a poor excuse for a road, swirling with dust devils, through the desert. And along that trek slavery was beginning to not look all that bad, to take on a new complexion—brighter, more glowing, in contrast to the griminess now surrounding them, the pale sand that drifted over every horizon. “Remember the feasts we had back in Egypt? The fish, the cucumbers, the melons, the garlic....?” [Numbers 11: 4] Now all we’ve got is this manna [eeuw].

Manna. That would be the grain of heaven. Kind of like coriander. Tasting like wafers made of honey. “When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it.” [Num 11: 6] And you could only gather up what you needed, but there was always enough.

“In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’” [Exodus 16: 13-15]

What is it? Couldn’t we have something familiar? Something we know is good?

A couple of years ago, when a group of UCC folk from the West Coast were visiting our Congregational sisters and brothers in Samoa, there were many feasts. We visitors were advised, before one sua, that we might be offered the head of a fish to eat. That this would be an honor, but, if this happened to not be to our taste we could graciously say, “Thank you, but I prefer something a little farther down on the fish” and there would be no offense given or taken. When the welcome table is spread with generosity, and draped with companionship, all the food is the bread of heaven.

But our spiritual forbears out there in the desert weren't quite at that place yet. There was a lot of grumbling. A lot of nostalgia. A lot of murmuring against the leaders of this little adventure. Yet as surely as they continued to set one foot in front of the other, they were on a journey toward understanding that God was their great companion, and The Holy One was spreading for them a table in the wilderness. Every day.

Holy Manna. Feeding our souls. Holy Manna. Keeping us alive. Holy Manna. The bread of companionship. Supplied to us in ways, shapes, containers, and tastes that will leave us shaking our heads, strengthened, ready.

What dusty road are you travelling today? What loss has numbed you? What injustice allows you no repose, no haven? As the twilight settles, though, look around you. Listen for that approaching footfall. A lot of the time we're been oblivious to one another. We're pre-occupied with our own lives, our own churches. But there are those moments of working together or playing together or worshipping together or having a meal together when all of a sudden we look around and see that we are really here together. On the same road, fellow travelers on the road of discipleship. With Jesus as our common companion. Bread fellow. Compañero.

Jesus is with us. As he was with Mary and Cleopas that Easter Sunday. If those two had not been hospitable, though, if they had not opened their home to a stranger, they might never have found Jesus again. We, too, begin here at this gathering with hospitality, with mutual welcome, with openness to one another. Then at the table, in the breaking of the bread, we will find Jesus. Christ will be among us. Holy Manna.

Because it's Easter Sunday. [Oh, I know it's May 17. But it's Easter Sunday]. And we all know it.