April 30, 2017  
Third Sunday of Easter  

By John R. Donahue, S.J.

The journey is one of the oldest biblical symbols. Abraham hears the command to become a “wandering” Aramean; Israel makes a journey through the wilderness where they are covenanted with the living God. Luke groups Jesus’ most distinctive teaching under the journey to Jerusalem (Luke. 9:51-19:28), while Acts is a series of journeys in an ever-widening circle outward from Jerusalem. Many find God as pilgrims to Lourdes or along the Camino, or metaphorically, as they embark on new life courses. The Gospel is a narrative parable of post-resurrection faith for Luke’s pilgrim community and for the Church through history.

Two people are leaving Jerusalem, in animated conversation about their shattered hopes. Words spill out culminating with the poignant words “we were hoping that he was the one to redeem Israel.” They knew of the crucifixion and reports of the resurrection, but this did not fit into their deepest hopes that Jesus would be a strong liberator who would free the land from Roman domination and punish sinners. This was the kind of Messiah they hoped for.

But a different story is now told. Jesus tells them that it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer all these things and enter into his glory, and he takes them through Moses and the prophets to show them this. They awaited a Messiah who would conquer enemies; Jesus was a messiah who taught that we should love our enemies, pray for them and show them goodness. Jesus was killed by enemies and spoke final words not of conquest, but a prayer to his Father, “Forgive them for they do not know what they do?” The people on the journey felt that Jesus was a prophet who would unmask sinners, yet Jesus is a prophet who embraces a weeping woman as her tears wash over his feet, and tells her that her sins are forgiven because she has loved much. A Messiah who conquers sin by compassionate love and subdues enemies by reconciliation and forgiveness, this is the new Easter story that Jesus tells them.

This parable of a post-Easter journey unfolds with more levels of meaning. The Emmaus pilgrims’ true understanding of the resurrection comes as Jesus breaks open the word of Scripture, and breaks bread with them—an icon of Eucharistic liturgies through the centuries. A critical turning point comes when Jesus feigns to leave and they offer him hospitality. Hospitality to the stranger who may bear the presence of Christ was one of the earliest and most enduring Christian practices. Such hospitality must inform our church today. We must be a church that repeats the words of the couple of the way to Emmaus, “Stay with us”—a church that says this to immigrants today.

The Gospel offers important signposts for the Church and nation today during our post-Easter journey. Instead of a nation that says “stay with us,” we are saying “go away.” The Emmaus travellers recognize Christ when they share a meal; recent policies are depriving
the poor of needed food. The new and already baptized have “put on Christ” (Messiah) who rejects violence and hatred; a recent newspaper article spoke of our “growing war footprint.”

The two travellers, now transformed, went back to Jerusalem “recounting what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of bread.” This was a new story of the victory over death and the presence of Jesus. As a community and nation can we open ourselves to entertain stories and histories that will change our understanding of who we are and how we have been in relation to other peoples, other nations?

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