

Third Sunday of Easter

St. Johns' Episcopal Church

Jamaica Plain, MA

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There is a famous saying among the rabbis: "If you want to make God laugh, tell him you have a plan!"

We recognize the humor here because we know how often our plans have been turned around or upside down by life, by its difficulties and sorrows, and by God's surprising grace in the midst of our life. In today's gospel we have a wonderful illustration of God's powerful presence in the midst of life!

The gloomy disciples are on the road, dejected because things have not turned out the way they planned. "We had hoped" they

said to Jesus. In Latin, "sperabamus." We had a plan. We knew how we wanted it to all turn out and it didn't turn out that way at all. And because the disciples cannot see beyond their shattered hopes and dreams, because they cannot look beyond what they had planned for the future, they could not hear the good news of the empty tomb. It was good news, but not for them, because they had hoped for something else. Something less. Something far more limited. Something far less imaginative than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But they so desired to have things turn out the way they planned that they could not hear the good news. And now, to top it all off, they are on the road with the Risen Christ himself. And what are they doing? Complaining to him. Complaining that what they had hoped for had not come true. They

had hoped that Jesus would not die. God surprised them with the resurrection. They had hoped for a political kingdom. God surprised them with the reign of God which will endure forever.

Most of us can recognize ourselves in these disciples. I know I can. When things are not as we had planned, or not the way we want, we also can be blinded to the presence of Christ walking with us along the way. We also can be deafened to the good news in the midst of our life. And so we are challenged in today's gospel to allow ourselves, our plans, our hopes, our dreams, to be shaped by God's surprising grace. We are challenged to fix our hearts and our eyes on the risen Christ, to fix our ears on the good news being proclaimed in the church and in the world and to follow where the risen Christ

and the gospel takes us, wherever that is. We are challenged to let go of the past if it is keeping us from recognizing Christ and hearing the gospel. We are challenged to let go of our ideas about how things ought to turn out, because God's grace is far more imaginative and creative than our plans. We are emboldened to do this, to fix our eyes on Christ, our ears on the gospel, and go forward into the future, because our faith and our hope are centered on God, not on our plans, even our good plans. Our faith and our hope are centered on God, not on what we've decided God will do, or what we've decided we will do for God. Remember that the risen Christ walks through closed doors, even ours!

As a child I knew that I wanted to give my life to God and to the church. I never seriously wanted anything else. But as my

life unfolded, the ways in which I live out that dream are radically different from what I would have imagined! Almost every decade brings an entirely new way of belonging to God! So also with us. The ways in which we recognize the risen Christ and bring good news to other people may look very different in 2011 from the way these things looked decades ago or even just a few years ago. What we are challenged to do is to trust that the risen Christ is leading the church into the future. With faith and hope in God, we need our eyes open to see Christ, our ears open to hear the gospel. The future is in God's hands. Let God draw it boldly with a free hand!

These gloomy disciples walking with their unknown guest on the way to Emmaus, came to an inn at suppertime. These are men after my

own heart! They may have been discouraged but they didn't want to miss a meal! So finally, when they are at table they recognize Jesus. He broke bread for them- the bread of the scriptures as they walked on their way, breaking open for them the word of God. He broke bread for them - the bread of life, the Eucharistic bread, and their eyes were opened. They recognized him for the first time. They realized then that he had been with them all along the way for the whole of their journey.

So also Christ is here with us each time we gather at worship to hear the word of scripture broken open for us by the Holy Spirit. Christ is here with us each time we gather around this altar to eat the bread of heaven and to drink the cup of salvation. The

risen Christ is here in our midst, shaping us into the body of Christ.

And as Christ shapes us we are formed into a community. A community, as our baptismal vows describe it, devoting itself to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. We are being shaped by God's spirit, into a community centered on the risen Christ. And then the community itself becomes a witness to others. By the way we live together we proclaim good news. The community itself becomes the message.

Many years ago I was a member of a religious order which was on the decline. We were deeply disturbed because new women were not joining us. We had countless meetings and discussions about why we were not attracting newcomers. We gradually became depressed and

hopeless as we saw the months go by with no new women entering the community. Then one Sunday the mother of one of the nuns came to our Sunday Eucharist. Afterwards she said to her daughter: "I don't know why anybody would join your group. None of you seems happy!" So much for our endless conversations! This woman saw right to the heart of the matter. We know from the Acts of the Apostles that the early Christians ate with glad and generous hearts, praising God, and the Lord added to their number day by day. Their life and worship together, their gladness and their joy was itself good news. "See what God has done with us!" they said. "Just imagine what God can do with you!"

Once the disciples at Emmaus saw the Lord they hurried back to Jerusalem to say: We recognized the Lord in the breaking of the

bread. Their religious experience, their encounter with the risen Christ made them apostles and missionaries. Christ in the broken bread and the shared cup turned them around- quite literally- set their feet free for running, their hearts free for joy, their voices free for telling the good news.

This morning as we hear the word of God and eat together around this altar, where are we? where are you? What do we need to hear as a church? What do you need to hear as part of the body of Christ? Are these scriptures asking you, asking us, to leave the past behind, to leave our plans and set ways of doing things behind, if they are holding on to us and tying us down, if our past or our expectations feel like a constraint and a barrier that prevent us from walking freely into the future? What is keeping us from

embracing whatever future God's Holy Spirit has in store for us?

Are you, is the church, being called to a deeper and richer experience of the risen Christ, a clearer and sharper vision of God's presence in the midst of our life and our work? Do we feel a powerful connection between Sunday morning and Monday morning? Is the presence of Christ felt here in our worship the same presence of Christ felt beyond our doors in the midst of our lives?

How deeply do we recognize the presence of God in word and sacrament? Is this hour of worship together transforming us, reviving our sagging spirits, emboldening the fearful and enflaming all our hearts, so that we cannot get enough of God, like a hungry person starving for the bread of life, like a thirsty person longing for the waters of

grace? Are you, are we, being called to be a gracious community, staying with one another faithfully even when we disagree, even when it's hard? Are you, are we, being called to fashion with God a community marked by joy and gladness, by generosity of spirit? When people see this community gathered together do they see God's amazing grace?

Are you, are we, being called to bring good news, to go from this altar to our homes and our neighborhoods, to our jobs and our schools, to all those whom God loves to say to them: "I have seen the Risen Christ." Are we being called to bring a message of joy and peace to those who are longing for joy and starving for peace?

Wherever God's surprising grace is calling you and calling us, we need to go. The God who is calling us is faithful. God is

with us on the way, all along the way. Let us look upon the risen Christ in our midst and simply say yes to him. And all the while we are learning to say yes, God will be leading us home.