3 Easter A + May 8, 2011
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho 
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Burning Hearts and the Word of God

The Word of the Lord from Luke 24:32: "They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

You’re no dummy. You didn’t just fall off the turnip truck. You don’t believe everything you hear. In fact, you know by now that, if you're going to get along in this world, it’s wise to live by the words, “Talk is cheap: I’ll believe it when I see it.” It’s good advice: if you’re buying a used car, it's best not to take the dealer's word for much, but to take it to a mechanic for a good look. It’s all very nice when someone you barely know asks for a favor and says, “You can trust me,” but you know that trust is earned over time by what you see and observe. So in this world, talk is cheap, and it makes sense that you only believe it when you see it.

Ah, but remember that the Lord and His salvation are not of this world: and when it comes to faith, He uses foolish things to shame the wise. For matters of this world, it’s usually perfectly fine to believe what you see. But when it comes to matters of faith, it is often true that looks deceive, and you should only believe what you hear. Our Gospel lesson for this third Sunday of Easter makes the point so clearly.

I. The Road to Emmaus

Two men are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They’re coming home at the end of the Passover celebration, and they’re talking with each other about all that has happened. They’re followers of Jesus; or at least, they were. But they’ve seen Him crucified and killed, and now they’re headed home. They’ve heard the women report that Christ is risen from the dead, but please: that’s pretty far-fetched. They know what they’ve seen with their eyes. To err on the charitable side, perhaps it’s best for us to say that they don’t know what to believe.

As they walk and talk, Jesus draws near to them. He lets them see Him, but doesn’t permit them to recognize Him—and this is a blessing for you, as we’ll get to in a few minutes. But first, the Lord asks, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” Note it well: Jesus asks them about their words, their talk. The question brings them to a standstill: since the Stranger is also coming from Jerusalem, why does He even have to ask? One of the men, Cleopas, answers, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” His response might as well be, “Didn’t You see what happened? Weren’t You a witness to the events of the past few days? For when the Stranger asks for clarification, they say,

“Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered Him up to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. 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 happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find His body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that He was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but Him they did not see” (Luke 24:19-24).
Note this about their account: they say, “We believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but then we saw Him crucified. We heard that He is risen, but we’re not buying the words of the women.” Talk is cheap and seeing is believing: that’s how it works in this world, yes?

Often, yes: but not when it comes to matters of faith. As St. Paul says in Romans 10:17, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ, and Christ is about to speak His Word to them: because no matter what they’ve concluded from what they’ve seen, His Word is far more sure. So He says, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:25-26). That’s the Lord’s diagnosis: these men know the Old Testament Scriptures, but they’ve only believed parts—they’ve ignored those passages which said the Messiah must suffer to win the victory.

So what happens next? Jesus doesn’t glow with glory and say, “Look at Me and know that I am risen.” He doesn’t even say, “Have you noticed the palms of My hands?” Instead we read, “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.” We don’t know which passages He specifically quotes to show that the Messiah would suffer to defeat sin and death. Perhaps He goes back to Genesis 3:15 to show them that the Messiah would crush the devil’s head, but have His heel bruised in the process. Perhaps He reminds them of the psalms they’d just sung during Passover, like Psalm 118: “The Lord has disciplined Me severely, but He has not given Me over to death,” and “I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.” Perhaps He quotes Isaiah 53, that the Servant of God would be stricken, smitten and afflicted for our sins. Maybe Zechariah 13, where God strikes the Shepherd and the sheep are scattered. At any rate, for the rest of the trip to the village, the Shepherd speaks His Word to gather these sheep back into the fold.

When they arrive at the village, they still don’t know who Jesus is; but when He acts as if He is going farther, they urge Him to stay and abide with them. It’s at the meal that Jesus finally lets their eyes really see. We read, “When He was at table with them, He took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him. And He vanished from their sight.”

Now, treasure their response: “They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?’” What great words for you! These disciples did not say, “Did you see that? Or, now that I’ve seen the risen Lord, I believe He is risen!” No, they say, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us while we heard Him speak the Word of God?” The risen Jesus has brought them back to faith by His Word before He ever opens their eyes so that they can see Him.

Remember: when it comes to this sinful world, seeing is believing. When it comes to faith, hearing is believing—for faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.

II. Hearing Is Believing

This Gospel lesson has all sorts of remarkable comfort for you. For one, we treasure it because it is one of the texts that witness to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. God declares in His Word that truth is to be established by at least two witnesses in this world, and so Cleopas and his friend kindly serve as witnesses to the Church through the ages as they testify that the Lord is risen. Archaeologists and historians get giddy when ancient events are corroborated by just one or two: the Risen Christ is attested by the women, by the disciples, by these two men and a host of others who saw Christ risen from the dead. Many will dismiss this, declaring that these people were simply perpetuating a lie to make themselves look better. But their witness had consequences, and did not make them look better to the world: rather than deny the risen Christ, many of these Christians suffered death to maintain that Jesus is risen indeed.

So we give thanks to God that we have two more witnesses in this text who saw the risen Christ, but there’s more cause for joy in this account. I mentioned before that it is a blessing for you that Jesus
doesn't permit these men to recognize Him on the road. Rather, He brings them to repentance and faith by means of His Word before they ever see Him with their eyes. Why is this such a blessing for you? Because by this text Jesus demonstrates how evangelism is going to work until He returns in glory. He demonstrates how He brings you to repentance and faith today.

You haven't seen Jesus with your eyes, either. You will when He returns in glory, but not before. But He declares in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them.” In Luke 24, Jesus was with these men throughout the story—even though they didn't recognize Him. The same Jesus is present with you, though you do not see Him. You don't have to see to believe, because you have something better than sight—you have His Word. Just as Jesus brought these men to repentance and faith by teaching them from the Scriptures, so He has brought you to repentance and faith by His holy Word. It is by His Word that He still makes and keeps you as His disciples. Furthermore, you can rejoice that Jesus made Himself known to them in the breaking of the bread at that evening meal. For you, He adds His Word to water, bread and wine so that He might make Himself known to you in His sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

You don't see Him, but you hear Him—and it's by His Word that Jesus gives you faith and keeps you in the faith. Remember the Transfiguration, when Jesus shone like the Son? God the Father declared, “This is My beloved Son—hear Him!” Not, "Look at Him," but "Hear Him!” Remember last week's Gospel lesson? Thomas said he wouldn't believe in Jesus until he put his fingers in the nailprints of His hands. What did Jesus say in response? “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.”

That's you—blessed are you! The Lord has made Himself known to you, and has made you His child, by His Word. By faith, you don't go by what you see, because in matters of faith hearing is believing.

This is important, because you're going to see a lot of things that would obscure Jesus, that would leave you as perplexed and hopeless as these two men before Jesus joined them. Because the Lord delivers forgiveness and faith by His Word, the devil, the world and your own flesh will want you to trust in what you see rather than God's Word that you hear.

Often, what you see will tempt you to sin. You'll see the world lining up in defense of this or that transgression, and you'll find yourself reasoning, “You know, God's Word does seem a little extreme on this point. I don't see why this sin is so bad.” Thus you reject what you have heard from the Word of God in favor of the popular opinion that you see. Sometimes, it's somebody terribly attractive to you who wants you to forsake God's Word so that the two of you can get along better, so that you can participate in some convenient sin. Once again, at such a time you're tempted to say, “I love this temptation that I see more than I fear God's wrath that I have heard about;” and this is how many shipwreck their faith. It's been this way since the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve chose the fruit that looked good over God's sure and certain Word. When you are confronted with such temptations, you repent: because you know that when you look around this world, you see with covetous and sinful eyes. What looks good doesn't matter: what matters is what God says is good, and He does so in His Word.

When the x-ray shows the dark shadow that isn't supposed to be there, or when you watch a solid relationship fall to pieces, when you're around seriously messed-up people and situations, or when you see the rejection notice or the empty place where a loved one used to be, the devil will use such things to turn you from the Word. He'll magnify these things before your eyes to make God's Word seem puny and helpless. He wants you to dismiss Christ's death and resurrection as having nothing to do with you. He wants you to think that God's Word of repentance and grace has no bearing on the situation, that these sights are far more powerful than God's promises. Honestly, this is where the devil tempts pastors to think that the Gospel is useless and ineffective, and tempts hearers to want magic words rather than the Good News of Christ. He tempts you to demand that God prove Himself by displays of power, not by His promises of faithfulness. But this is all the devil's lies. You know from God's Word that
such things will happen in a sinful world, but you are not forsaken. You know that Christ has died on the cross—bearing all of your sins and infirmities in order to conquer them for you; and you know that Christ is risen from the dead. You know that He says to you, “Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.” He uses these things to teach you to trust in yourself not at all, but rather to trust in Him for all. So when everything you see declares that you are weak and all is lost, you say, “I am weak, but all is not lost. Christ is strong and has conquered all things for me. No matter what my eyes see, I have His promise that He’s made me His own, that He’s written my name on the palms of His hands.” When everything you see speaks only of danger and loss, you confess your fears and you cling to Christ’s Word, for He promises that He forgives your sins and that He will deliver you from all your fears.

It will not always be this way: on the Last Day, you will be raised up to see Jesus in glory. But until then, the Lord ministers to you the same way that He did to these two men on the road: He grants you grace and faith by means of His holy Word. This is no small thing—it’s powerfully all-sufficient! By that Word, He gives you everything necessary to strengthen and preserve you until He delivers you from this world.

Until then, with the Church you pray, “Stay with us Lord, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent;” and Jesus speaks in His Word to reply, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

He speaks to promise, “Nothing can snatch you out of My hand.”

He speaks to say, “I forgive you for all of your sins.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen