

## Living Faith

1 Peter 1: 17-23, Luke 24: 13-35

Dr. George R. Sinclair

“I used to know someone who looked like you,” she said with a coy smile. Her husband shook my hand and then it hit me, “I know these people: Roy, Fran! Hang on a minute; I want to talk to you.”

I wasn't expecting Roy and Fran. I hadn't seen them in five years. Some of you remember Roy and Fran Nichols—Roy was the School Superintendent; Fran, a vital part of our church—the Nichols came from LaGrange where I had been their pastor. They were members here for about five years before moving back to LaGrange. As friends do, Roy and I had exchanged a few emails; but we hadn't seen each other. I wasn't expecting them Easter Sunday. They appeared without notice. And I didn't recognize them—not at first, not until Roy stuck out his hand with a big smile. Roy had always worn a mustache, but the whiskers on his chin were new. And Fran, well, Fran was wearing glasses and her hair was shorter. I hadn't expected them and their appearance had changed. Had I seen them regularly, I would have known that Fran had stopped wearing her contacts and that Roy had grown a goatee. Had we stayed in touch, I would have known that they had purchased a condo at Perdido. Had we seen one another more regularly, I would have known they were going to be here on Easter. Truth is, had they not teased me at the door on Easter, I might have missed them altogether.

It's common enough—non-recognition—ever been to a high school or college reunion? Before my last reunion, I went through the high school yearbook. Eighteen year olds don't stay eighteen, do they?

Ten days ago, out of the blue, I received an email from a guy I hadn't seen or heard from in forty-six years. Gran explained in his email that he had run into an old friend of mine at a tennis match in North Carolina; he *Googled* and found me on the Internet and wrote asking me to call. I did. And when I heard his voice, I could see his face. And the longer we reminisced, the more I could see the lanky eighteen-year-old who played safety on our all-star team forty-six years ago.

Staying in-touch does wonders for friendship. It's difficult to impossible to keep friendship alive and growing apart from being present face to face. Without presence, memories fade, ties weaken. The same is true of faith. Staying in-touch keeps faith alive. Staying in-touch keeps faith fresh. Staying in-touch helps us endure rough patches and thin times. Staying in-touch brings joy. The common faith we share is fed by Word and Sacrament. The story of the Emmaus Road is a telling demonstration.

Emmaus was something less than a day's walk from Jerusalem. On the day Christ rose from the dead, two followers of Jesus left Jerusalem and set out for Emmaus. Along the way, they were joined by a third party who invited himself into their deep discussion. Luke describes their response in these words, “They stood still, looking sad.” One of the two, a man named Cleopas, broke the silence of their sadness with biting sarcasm: “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”

The stranger replied, “What things?”

The travel companions rehearsed “the things” that had happened. Cleopas and his companion explained to the stranger that they had been followers of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. “He was a prophet,” they said. “He did mighty deeds before God and all the people; he was handed over to the authorities who condemned him to death and crucified him. We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel. And besides all of this, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning. They didn't find the body. They told us that they had seen a vision of angels and that he was alive. Some in our group went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.”

Cleopas and his travel companion were among the first to hear the news of Christ's resurrection. They considered it “an idle tale.” They didn't believe, so they left Jerusalem. “We had hoped he was the

one to redeem Israel; he only succeeded in getting himself killed. That's why we're going to Emmaus. We had hoped he was the one."

It sounds plausible, doesn't it—the conversation—I mean it sounds right. "Christ has died. Christ is risen. And the world, well, how is it any different? Looks like the same old world—injustice, oppression, disease, famine, warfare, gossip, envy, slander, strife; you name it, the world is as the world was. Christ has died. Christ is risen. So what?"

The stranger answered the "so what?" or at least invited a counter narrative for Cleopas and his companion to consider: "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

As the three drew near their destination, the stranger "walked ahead as if he were going on." Cleopas and his companion begged him to stay. "It's late; let's eat." The stranger stayed and while they were at table, the stranger took bread, blessed it and gave it to Cleopas and his companion and "their eyes were opened." That's how Luke describes the scene. "Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." The disciples recognized the risen Lord.

Moments like that cannot be anticipated much less fabricated. How we come to faith in Jesus is not subject to explanation. Yes, we can point to it; we attempt to analyze it; but how faith is received or given resists explanation. What we can say is that faith is nurtured or has opportunity to take root when we are near the Lord. Luke gives us a model for living faith—proximity to Word and Sacrament. Clearly, we don't control outcome. After all, that night in Emmaus, Jesus "vanished from their sight." The church testifies to Word and Sacrament; the church does not control Word and Sacrament: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Faith alive is the work of God not mere enthusiasm—God's Spirit "bearing witness with our spirits that we are indeed children of God," as Paul wonderfully put it.

So, what does that mean for us? It means staying in-touch. Faith lives when we are together at Table and when together we open the Bible and read it. I know it sounds all too common: break bread; study the Bible. Surely there's something more, something more esoteric, spiritual, ethereal. No, not really. God promises to open our eyes when together we break Bread and read the Word. If we want a living faith, we break bread together and read the Bible. And a living faith not only changes us, it changes the world. Living faith doesn't provide a trouble free life. Living faith doesn't resolve every difficulty or challenge or remove every obstacle. Living faith enables us to take hold of life and live it fully and freely to the glory of God. Living faith sends us squarely into the world, to be salt and light, and leaven. Living faith makes us into a community of hope where justice and mercy mark our path, where hospitality and welcome define our character, where goodness and mercy bring blessing and peace. Living faith follows a living Lord, the One who was crucified, the One who is risen, the One who reigns eternally. Living faith makes us fully alive to God and to the world God creates and sustains and is redeeming. Amen.