In the Breaking of the Bread

You know, it would have been nice if Jesus had just made himself a little clearer. Here he rises from the dead, meets two people who already know him, who are eager to believe in him, who have even heard the first rumors that he might have risen from the dead, but . . . How does Luke put it? . . . “Their eyes were held back from recognizing him.” Why? What’s with all this obfuscation? Why hide the most important miracle in history?

It is, you know. This is the clincher. This is the hinge that Christianity hangs on. Without the resurrection, we’re a service organization and social club. So, it would seem important to make that central event clear, wouldn’t you say? Jesus should have blown the door off that tomb with a huge explosion, then stepped through the swirling smoke and stood in the open doorway while awed and cheering crowds witnessed the event. Those crowds would need to include prominent men and women, Roman writers, recognized scientists, philosophers and opinion-makers, and of course the Jewish religious leaders who had sent him up. Then they would have all had to admit that Jesus had risen, and these people who are not followers of Christ would have recorded that fact in writings that would constitute independent verification of our favorite miracle. Wouldn’t that be great? Then we could take those ancient writings to Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and all the other so-called “New Atheists” and tell them to stuff it. “How do you explain this?” we’d say. That would be so cool! We Christians would have an undisputed, empirically verified, historiographically accurate center for our faith, and everybody would have to believe us. But, again, that’s not what happened. Nobody saw Jesus rise, and even when people who knew him saw him after he had risen, their eyes did not recognize him. In fact, it sounds as if he didn’t even want them to.

Read Luke 24:25-29
So Jesus is walking with these two old friends who do not recognize him, and instead of offering empirical evidence, Jesus starts preaching. From the Old Testament, no less. He goes back through the law of Moses and the words of the Hebrew Prophets, showing them how the God that is described in the Hebrew Bible is not actually fulfilled by a conqueror messiah, as everyone was expecting, but by a messiah who would die and then rise again. He explains to these two the radically unexpected nature of God’s salvation – that it is not about restoring the Jewish monarchy or reclaiming the Promised Land, but about restoring the human soul and renewing all of earth and heaven. It was a great sermon. The two disciples hung on every word. So, when they reach Emmaus, and Jesus starts to walk on by, they invite him to stay for dinner. But they still haven’t recognized him. All that preaching, all that theologizing, all that sound doctrinal explanation, and they still don’t know him.

Read Luke 24:30-35
Then it happens. They sit down around the table to eat together. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, and hands it around. Then they know him. Then they recognize him. Then their eyes are opened. And Jesus disappears. I’m not sure I understand that detail either – it’s as if Jesus is saying, “Now that you know me, you don’t need to see me.” Whether he’s saying that or not, though, that seems to be the case. Jesus disappears, and the disciples don’t seem to mind. Instead they start putting all the other evidence in place: “Were not our hearts burning while he talked to us?” Now that they know him, everything else fits together perfectly. But they didn’t know him by means of physical evidence or by means of good preaching.

One more time. The Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead is the central truth of our faith and of the entire salvation history of God’s creation. And I do not use that word “truth” lightly. Christ is Risen, and that is the Truth.

But the truth I speak of is not scientific truth, based on measurable data and observable phenomena. There are those for whom is the only valid sort of truth. These people are not interested in any truth that cannot be tested scientifically, measured in the laboratory, verified by physical evidence. I am sorry for those people; their lives and minds seem to me to be tragically limited. There are even some Christians who think this way. Every generation there seems to be a new Christian writer – Josh MacDowell, Lee Strobel – who sets out to prove Christ’s resurrection scientifically. These are very clever men, and their books are very popular, and they invariably convince everyone who already agreed with them that they are right, but insofar as these writers also seem to assume that only scientific truth is valid, their minds are just as limited as the Atheists’. Remember, Jesus didn’t want to be recognized by means of physical evidence.

Nor is the truth I speak of theological or doctrinal truth. Again, there are those for whom this is the primary sort of truth, the truth before which every other sort must take a back seat. “This is what my church or my interpretation of the Bible says, and that’s all that matters.” Now I’m not opposed to doctrine, much. Solid teaching is very useful. Even Jesus did it, remember? But remember also that the disciples did not recognize the Risen Christ through his teaching; instead, they began to truly appreciate his teaching after they recognized him. A lesson here for us preachers: what we do up here on Sunday mornings is not a bad thing, much. But this is not how people come to know the Risen Christ.

Neither through science nor theology can we know the truth of the Resurrection. How do we recognize the Risen Christ? How did the disciples in Luke? Through the breaking of the bread. It was when Jesus ate with them, sat at the table with them, prayed over the meal, then shared their food that their eyes were opened. We know Christ through the breaking of the bread. And I’m not just getting all high church and talking about the sacrament of Communion here. I’m talking about what every meal represents. I’m talking about all the meals that Jesus shared with us through his ministry – eating with the hungry, with the outcast, with the despised, with the pious, with his friends. We know Christ through relationship – no, that’s too tame, too clinical. We recognize Christ when we know we are loved. We grow to know Christ when we love others. That’s what breaking bread together means. It is a love feast. When we love across every boundary, over every wall, in spite of every limit set by the dry dictates of science and doctrine, then we will begin to recognize Christ. And others will recognize the Risen Christ in us.
In the breaking of the bread.

Communion

One more Resurrection story. The rumors kept flying, and his disciples huddled together behind locked doors, whispering and wondering. Then, with a sublime disregard for the laws of science, Jesus appeared in their midst. They stared at him, not recognizing him, terrified. Finally Jesus spoke. He uttered words of power and love and majesty. He said, “Guys, I’m hungry. You want to give me something to eat?” And then they knew him. Alleluia.