



St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401

Parish Offices & Education Building
 Location at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.
 Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone : 410-267-9333
 Fax 410-280-3181
www.stannes-annapolis.org

Amy Richter

3 Easter A: Luke 24:13-35

St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD

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Jesus – Stay With Us

A few years ago, this tribute appeared in the magazine, *The Christian Century*, about a man named Red Davis, who lived and died in Marshall, Texas.¹ The writer (Gordon Atkinson) says, “Red Davis was nobody special in this world, or he was a great saint. I guess it all depends on how you look at things, but I’ll tell you something true and wonderful: ‘nobody special’ and ‘great saint’ go together a lot more often than people think. Twenty-five years ago Red Davis was the CEO of a big company in East Texas . . . this company provides so many jobs for local people that it is somewhat famous in those parts. Some would say the crowning achievement of Red’s life was attaining a high position in such an important company. I don’t know. . . I only know what Red did after he retired. . . After Red got his gold watch and had his retirement party, he went to the man who was the pastor [of his church] and told him he would like to find a way to serve the Lord. The pastor assumed that Red would chair a critical financial committee for the church, or be involved in some other important and public way. He was surprised when Red said that the Sunday school class for three- and four-year-olds needed a teacher and that he would like the job. And so it came to pass that the CEO of the most important company in the county showed up next Sunday morning to sit on the floor and tell Bible stories to little children. He didn’t know much about teaching children in the beginning, but he was . . . kind. . . and he knew patience [is important. He] used to call all the kids in his class every Saturday night to ask how their week had gone. He always ended the conversation by telling them he looked forward to seeing them on Sunday morning. . . None of [them] ever wanted to miss church. Five years became ten, and ten became 25. Red slowed down a bit, but he was there every Sunday for a quarter of a century. Almost everyone in the church had a child or grandchild who had been in Red’s class. . . If Red

ever stood up to speak in a church business meeting, a respectful and reverent hush would fall over the congregation. People respected Red not because he was a successful businessman, but because he was the gentle Sunday School teacher and passionate about [teaching the Bible to] children. At Red's funeral, the pastor told the story of the woman who was in the local grocery store with her small child. The little boy said, "Mama, I just saw God." The woman looked up and the child was pointing at Red Davis. . . . When [the boy] tried to wrap his little mind around the very big idea of God, the best he could do was think of Red."

It's May and we have a few weeks left here at St. Anne's of Christian Formation for all ages, before we take a summer break.

Today's gospel lesson is a great passage for exploring what it means that we are all invited to engage in Christian formation, that is, the lifelong journey of becoming the disciples Jesus calls us each to be. It's a lifelong journey because Jesus is always calling us to follow, in every circumstance of our lives, and those always change. It's a lifelong journey because, since our lives are wrapped up with God, there's always a deeper place we can go, more meaning to discover, more love we can know. The journey begins at the baptismal font, when we're baptized, and we're never really finished, not in this life.

So here we are, on the Third Sunday of Easter, and we encounter two disciples on a journey. Theirs is not a joyful adventure – not at first. They walk with heavy hearts. Their friend and savior has been crucified. Their hopes are dashed. Their loyalties are meaningless. And, frankly, they worry that some of the woman disciples have lost it, seeing visions of angels and an empty tomb where a dead body should be.

On this journey, Jesus joins them, but they don't recognize him. He interprets scripture for them, does a Bible study with them as they walk. When they get to Emmaus, they invite him to stay, and when Jesus does the actions of the Eucharist – taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, to give it to them – they realize the person who has been with them all along—the one who accompanied them in their sorrow, fed them with study of God's Word, has become the host at their table, is the Risen Jesus.

When they recognize Jesus, he disappears from their sight. But they are not dismayed or alarmed that he is no longer visible to them. They are

overjoyed. They know he is alive and known in scripture, in the sharing of hospitality and fellowship, in the breaking of bread. They hurry all the way back to Jerusalem to share the good news of the presence of the Risen Lord. Their journey, begun in sadness, has turned to hope and off they go to Jerusalem – at night! It is evening – not the time for being on the road, and yet, they are emboldened, empowered by hope and joy, and –off they go— taking risks for the sake of the good news.

Here is good news: Christ is risen and he does not limit his presence to those with full confidence in him. He does not just come to people of strong hearts and unquestioning faith. Jesus comes to those who do not know their Bibles, but who are ready to listen and learn from scripture. He comes to those who do not recognize him even when they are walking right beside him. He comes to those who have given up their dreams and are heading back home. He comes to those with broken spirits and dashed hopes. He comes and is willing to listen to what they are concerned about. If invited, he will enter in. If offered hospitality, he will bless it. And absolutely he is present in the breaking of the bread.

I said this is a great Christian formation text and this is what I mean. Our formation, our being shaped, our being formed more and more into the fullness of the abundant life of following Jesus involves these two important pieces: education and worship. Jesus explains scripture to them and he is made known to them in the Eucharistic moment of breaking the bread. Jesus teaches them and they have an encounter with the Holy in a time of worship. They have both and they need both. Their eyes and hearts are opened by both. Both work to form us into Jesus' disciples. This is true for adults. This is true for children.

Education is not enough. They don't know it is Jesus until they glimpse him in worship – in that place of ultimate hospitality where we say to Jesus more than, "This is interesting," but, "Stay with me." Worship is that place – wherever it is, it doesn't just happen in church, but it certainly happens in church – where we dare to ask Christ to enter in, where we praise and pray and say, "thy will be done."

And Christian education can help us live more deeply into those worship experiences, by training us to look for the signs of Jesus Christ among us – in Scripture, in the stranger who works or walks beside us, in those whom we serve. Christian education can help us delight and wonder

in the world, can help immerse us in the traditions and teachings and questions of the church, so we can come to worship with our ears perked and our eyes wide open, our hearts on fire, our sense of awe and wonder peaked and ready to participate. Learning and worship, education and experience of the holy – both form us into Jesus’ followers. Both help us to come closer to Jesus and say, “Stay with us.”

The late spiritual writer Henri Nouwen reflected on the Eucharist and its meaning as a place of invitation. He wrote, “Having listened to [God’s] word, we have to . . . dare to say [to Jesus], “I trust you; I entrust myself, with all my being, body, mind, and soul to you. . . I don’t want you to be a stranger any longer. I want you to become my most intimate friend. I want you to know me, not only as I walk on the road and talk to my fellow travelers, but also as I find myself alone with my innermost feelings and thoughts. And most of all, I want to come to know you . . . as the companion of my soul.” And, writes Nouwen, “even when Jesus becomes our most intimate friend, he will in some ways remain a stranger. Even when we experience his peace, his comfort, his rest, he will also always be calling us to new life, transformation, service, work.”ⁱⁱ

It’s a lifelong journey, and, if we follow, we may find ourselves in places and with people we would never expect, doing work we never would have dreamed we would do, discovering Jesus present with us all along.

When you invite the Risen Jesus to stay with you, when you study his word and eat at his table, he will come into your heart and your life, and who knows where he will lead you. Who knows who you will meet on life’s road who also needs to hear good news, to know that their despair may be turned to hope, their hearts may burn with hope and joy within them. Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. And then bid us follow you. Amen.

ⁱ Gordon Atkinson, “Following Red: Keys to a Child’s Heart” *The Christian Century* December 14, 2004. <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-12/following-red>.

ⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: Meditations on the Eucharistic Life* (Orbis Books, 1994).