**STAY WITH US**

**Acts 2:14; Psalm 116; 1 Peter 1; Luke 24**

**Did you notice that all four of our scripture readings deal not just with Christ’s resurrection, but also with trusting him? So, how odd that Cleopas and friend didn’t recognize Jesus on their long walk. Maybe that’s because these two disciples weren’t original members of the “Big 12-conference of disciples. More likely, Cleopas and his friend didn’t recognize Jesus, because they couldn’t bring themselves to trust in such an amazing miracle as the resurrection. More than one of the original twelve disciples had a hard time recognizing Jesus after the resurrection—right Thomas? Yet Cleopas and his friend must have been close to Jesus at times to know how he broke bread. From Jesus’ day right up to today, why have so many people failed to recognize Christ, much less ask him to stay with them?**

**Well, for starters, it’s tough for most people to believe in miracles. And then there are those who feel they aren’t important enough for God to take an interest in, or good enough to deserve his attention. So they don’t bother to look for Jesus in their lives. Still others dismiss religion altogether, having heard their friends make fun of it too many times. And for sure, some people are chased away from Christ from thinking they must earn their way into heaven by being goodie two-shoes.**

**So, how do people recognize Jesus? Actually, he makes it easy. He comes to us, in a personalized way--often through others who trust in him from personal experience. The love of Jesus shines through us to others when we love them the same way Jesus loves them: unconditionally. Or as Mr. Rogers used to say on TV: I like you just the way you are. Christ wants us to have a personal relationship with him; not to be just Christians, but to be Christ-ians.**

**And then over time, we recognize Jesus even more clearly through experiencing his truths in our lives. We discover that serving others also enriches our own lives. That the pure in heart really do see God at work. That the Christian’s burden is light. That God’s truth does set us free.**

**We begin to see the light of Christ’s many parables and fathom the deep teachings from his Sermon on the Mount. We recognize how prayers have been answered. How our spiritual life has become more abundant, and about the blessings of forgiving others. We also come to recognize Jesus purifying our motives; calming our qualms; and bringing the right people into our lives at the right times. We have indeed recognized that Jesus is God’s-own-son.**

**So, when someone recognizes Christ in their life, what next? Now it’s time to**

**T-R-U-S-T trust him. The letter T in trust is for teaching: teach us, Lord, how to live life abundantly. R is for renewing us physically with our daily bread, and spiritually by our growing knowledge of his word.**

**The U in trust represents Christ’s unique personal understanding of us--our true inner self and struggles. S is for servanthood. We serve others before ourselves. And finally, the bookend letter T in trust stands for truth: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. The Christ-ian life is all about teaching, and renewing, and understanding, and serving, and truth.**

**So how did the disciples come to trust Jesus? Through four spiritual growth experiences he personally shared with them. First, Jesus established a personal relationship between his disciples and the invisible people of the day: the sinners, the downtrodden, the losers.**

**Jesus brought his disciples along when he ministered to these nobodies living non-abundant lives, usually through no fault of their own. Christ wanted his disciples then-and-now to recognize, to love, and to minister to the sheep that have no shepherd.**

**And how did these invisible people respond to Jesus? Crowds of them immediately recognized him as their long-awaited Messiah--a man from God who truly loved them and cared for their lives.**

**Servanthood was the disciples’ second spiritual learning journey, as Jesus showed them how to care for his sheep in both physical and spiritual ways.**

**One time for physical nourishment, he miraculously fed five thousand of the flock from one small bag of fish and bread. Jesus also fed the five thousand spiritually by teaching them about his loving father in heaven. And spiritual food is what Jesus meant when, after the resurrection, he told Peter to “feed my lambs and tend my sheep.”**

**In Jesus’ third set of life-molding experiences, he taught his disciples three ways to minster to sinners. Number one: to forgive; number two: to forgive; and number three: to forgive. Because forgiveness heals broken people. Unforgiven people get so shanghaied by guilt and rejection, they feel they don’t even deserve forgiveness.**

**Jesus forgave prostitutes, crooked tax collectors, Roman officials, and several of his closest disciples, winning not only their trust, but also their souls. Through his unconditional love and acceptance, Jesus made their lives whole, and their sins gradually fell-by-the-wayside.**

**In the disciples’ fourth spiritual growth experience, Jesus sent his rapidly-expanding followers out two-by-two to witness the greatest miracle in life: being born again. As the traveling disciples spread the word about their master, they marveled over the scores of people who recognized and accepted Jesus as the son of God. And when the disciples rejoined Jesus after completing their evangelism, they couldn’t get the words out of their mouths fast enough, describing their life-changing spiritual experience.**

**Over the past two thousand years, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, have personally escorted all trusting Christ-ians through these very same life-transforming steps: reaching out to lost sheep; nourishing them physically and spiritually; forgiving others; and loving them unconditionally.**

**My all-time favorite lost sheep in the bible was the nameless Samaritan woman-at-the-well, a very irregular person with her cornucopia of marriages and boyfriends. Even worse for her, she was one of those Samaritans, shunned by the Jews for intermarrying with non-Jews. This brazen woman flat out confessed her sinful life to Jesus--no hesitation, no quibbling, no excuses. Why? Because she instantly recognized Jesus as the Messiah, in contrast to the Jewish religious leaders who thought they were the only ones who led perfect lives.**

**After Jesus told the woman about the water that satisfies your thirst forever, what did she do? Quite unlike Jesus’ tongue-tied disciples, this new Christ-ian woman went right back to her village and shined Jesus through herself to everyone there--who then embraced the very Messiah rejected by his own people. The despised Samaritans recognized who Jesus was, but not the pious Jewish leaders!**

**Do you recall what Jesus said about God’s spiritual harvest fields? He said the fields were ripe for what? (harvesting) But the workers were? (few) Well, that’s hardly surprising given the nature of the harvest--it ain’t exactly 100% pure and organic. Few people harvested in God’s human fields are sinless; few are in control of their lives; few are rich and comfortable; few are welcome in polite society.**

**And today there are far-more lost, un-herded sheep than ever before. Christ wants them to recognize him, trust him, and follow him before he returns again to our wobbly world. And today, more than 20 centuries later, Jesus’ plan is still for the lost sheep to recognize him through his invisible disciples, like us.**

**Let’s draw things to a close by getting back to Cleopas and his friend hiking those seven l-o-n-g miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus with Jesus, whom they didn’t recognize. All that way with no clue. But once they saw Jesus break bread, they knew. Our shepherd knows his sheep better than we know him. He ministers to us individually, one-by-one. He protects us even when we don’t realize it. We sheep don’t have to do anything to be part of his flock--just trust him. After all, he gave his life for us.**

 **Do you remember the three words Cleopas and friend told Jesus upon arriving at Emmas? “Stay with us.” How sad that so many people in Jesus’ own day didn’t want him to stay. Is it really any different today? Jesus stays with everyone who invites him into their lives. As shepherd David expressed in the 23rd Psalm: Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Jesus walks with us too, through our mortal life and right into our eternal life with him. He is our forever fellow-walker and companion.**

**So, let’s close with a simple five-word prayer: I’ll say the first two words, “Jesus please”… and then would you please repeat the three-word invitation made by Cleopas and his friend? Remember their three words? It’s OK to ask your neighbor.**

**All right, I’ll start the prayer with my two words, and then when I give you the signal, you can finish with your three words. Ready? Let us pray:**

**JESUS PLEASE…STAY WITH US. Amen!**