

Known in the Breaking of the Bread
Luke 24:13-35
Native American Ministries Sunday
May 8, 2011
Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

It was in the spring, after the cold, harsh winter had ended, and a group of the Lakota Nation were wandering, strangers in a new country. They were tired and hungry, searching for buffalo, almost without hope.

Early one morning the leaders told two young men to climb a hill and look out over the country for the herds. As they came to the top of the hill, they were surprised to see a young woman climbing up toward them from the other side of the hill. She was carrying a bundle on her back. She was a stranger, mysterious, and as she came closer, they could see that she was very beautiful. They didn't recognize her at all.

One of the young men whispered bad thoughts and went to put his arms around her. The other man said, "No! Do not touch her. She is a holy woman." But he would not listen.

Suddenly lightning flashed and thunder shook the ground and clouds hid them on the hilltop. As the wind died down, the clouds lifted, and the woman stood there alone. At her feet were bones—all that was left of the man with bad thoughts. The other man was so frightened that he turned to run. But she called out to him, "Stay! No harm will come to you. Tell your leader I have something to give to him. Tell him to erect a council tipi with a buffalo skull altar at the center, and let everyone gather there at dawn tomorrow."

The man ran down to the camp quickly, and told his people what had happened. They wondered who this woman could be.

They erected a council tipi just as the woman had asked. Early the next morning everyone dressed in their best clothes and gathered inside the great tipi. They were in great awe after hearing of the mysterious woman.

Then she appeared, walking across the prairie toward the opening in the camp circle of tipis. Her breath was like a cloud in the cold morning air. She was singing as she came near:

With visible breath I am walking
Toward this Nation I am walking
With visible breath I am walking
With this red pipe I am walking.

The mysterious woman carried a pipe. She approached the chief in the council tipi, whose name was Buffalo Standing Upright, and he invited her to sit. He dipped braided

sweetgrass into a buffalo-horn cup filled with water for her to sip. "Sister, we are glad you have come," he said.

She thanked him and said to everyone present: "Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, told my Buffalo People to send me to you today. He has seen your tears. He knows you have always tried to do what is right, so he gives you this pipe. Pray with it, and you will see your prayers rise up to him with the smoke, and you will know he hears you. The pipe will join nations and families together in love and peace, and so from today, your people and my Buffalo Nation will be one family."

She took a glowing chip from the fire and lit the pipe. She offered smoke to the Four Winds, to the east, to the north, to the west, and to the south, in thanks for all the good things that the four winds give. She handed the pipe to the person on her left, and it went from hand to hand round the circle, and children touched it with reverence as it passed.

When the pipe had completed the circle, she leaned it against the buffalo skull. She said to them all, "This is your pipe. Carry it always and the Great Spirit will help you on your pathway through life. Pray always. Look for what is good and true. I will always remember you, and in time I will return. We are all related."

And she was gone. Everyone looked around, and then they saw a white buffalo calf jump up and run off to join the buffalo herd that had just then arrived.

This is the Lakota legend of the White Buffalo Woman.

It is a story about a people wandering in a time of uncertainty and an encounter with a person they do not recognize. It is a person who brings them hope. In this encounter, they recognize their own hope for the future.

Another story—

Two men were walking to a village outside of Jerusalem. So much had happened in the last three days and they were talking about it all. Their eyes were downcast, and they were looking sad. A third man joined them as they walked along. They didn't recognize him. He asked them about the things they were saying. They couldn't believe he didn't know about the things of which they were speaking—about Jesus who was a prophet and how he had been crucified and put in a tomb. And on the third day, that very morning, the followers had gone to the tomb, but the body was gone.

And then the strange man started telling all about the Scriptures and how it was necessary that this man named Jesus die. Then the strange man walked on ahead, as if he would leave the others. But, out of hospitality, they invited him to stay. And together the three men went into a house where there was a table. Then the strange man did a strange thing. He, who was the guest, assumed the role of the host, and took the bread, blessed it, and broke it and gave it to them. In that moment, the men recognized Jesus. And then he vanished.

Later that night the two men returned to Jerusalem and told the eleven other followers of Jesus how Jesus had appeared to them and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

It is a story that begins with sadness in being alone and ends with recognition that in fact we are not alone! It is a story of recognition that the living Christ comes to us in communion—and in community. We are not alone.

In all cultures we have stories of death and new life, despair and new hope. But to experience the new life and the new hope it takes recognition! Sometimes the life and the hope are disguised. We might have to stop and notice—we might have to pass a peace pipe and look into the face of our neighbor as we pass the pipe. We might have to invite the guest in and break bread together. For it is in the hospitality of community, that we find new life and new hope.

I wonder as you walk on the Road to Emmaus what sadness you are holding this day. I wonder in what way you are walking alone. Is there a messenger of hope whom you have yet to recognize walking with you? What do you need to do, in order for hope to be made known to you?

Perhaps you need to invite a coworker to have lunch with you, and then you might recognize a potential for a new relationship. Perhaps you need to stop and talk to your child (or your parent, spouse, or housemate) and listen in a deeper way to hear her needs. And then you might recognize something about her you had missed before. Perhaps you can be a messenger of hope to her.

The more we open our eyes to recognizing God's presence in our lives, the more we can live as people of the resurrection. In the culture of Native American tribes, the Great Spirit brings food—in the grains of the plains and in the buffalo herds, and the Great Spirit brings promise of peace—in the peace pipe shared 'round a community and in the circle of life—represented by the mandala or the circle of tipis in an Indian village.

In the cultures of people here today, the God we worship comes to us in family gatherings when we honor our mothers and fathers, in worship services when we sing and pray together, and in small groups of people who care deeply about each other, deeply enough to say, "I will walk with you when you are alone. I will break bread with you when you are spiritually hungry." We are for one another the presence of the living Christ. May we open our eyes and recognize the love of God made known to us in the everyday walk of life and in the breaking of the bread.