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[13] Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, [14] and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. [15] While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, [16] but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. [17] And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. [18] Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" [19] He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, [20] and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. [21] But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. [22] Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, [23] and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. [24] Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." [25] Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! [26] Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" [27] Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

[28] As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. [29] But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. [30] When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. [31] Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. [32] They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" [33] That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. [34] They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" [35] Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV)

BLIND SPOTS

Toward the end of his life the famous scientist, Carl Sagan became friends with some people who were Christians. He appreciated their friendship, but he was puzzled at how such intelligent people could possibly believe the promises of the ancient Christian faith. The claims of the faith could not be proven scientifically, and they were therefore, in his way of thinking, irrelevant.

What made him a good scientist was his overwhelming urge to know a truth that could be proven. But, his single-minded devotion to the scientific method kept him from understanding a greater truth, a truth that goes beyond what we can see and measure. Science can teach us how something works, but science can never teach us the meaning of our world. It is not designed to answer those kinds of questions.

Douglas Sloane in his book on higher education said that since 1900 our universities have placed an emphasis on what he called "quantifiable thinking", that is, subjects dealing with statistics, money and matter.

On the other hand we have de-emphasized subjects dealing with "qualifiable thinking", thoughts of beauty, right and wrong, good and bad.

We are only able to see what we have been taught to see. In that regard, all of us have blind spots.

This past week I was fitting a drawer to a frame. It wasn't working right. I had an idea what was wrong, but no matter what I did the problem wasn't corrected.

Finally, someone pointed out the real problem and immediately my eyes were opened. I knew how to correct the problem, and it took only minutes to fix. I couldn't see and fix what was wrong until my faulty presuppositions were corrected. I was looking at the problem from the wrong angle.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever been struggling with a problem because you can't seem to get your mind thinking in the proper direction? And then someone explains it to you, and you slap yourself in the head and say, "How could I have been so blind?"

THEY DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HIM

That's what our story for today is about. It's about some disciples of Jesus who had a spiritual blind spot. When Jesus joined them on the road to Emmaus, they didn't recognize him. More specifically, the Bible tells us that they were "kept from recognizing him."

What kept them from recognizing Jesus? I would suggest that it was their faulty presuppositions that kept them from recognizing Jesus.

They, like the other disciples, had their own ideas about the identity of Jesus and how he was going to bring in the kingdom of God. And they just couldn't bring themselves to think about Jesus in any other way. When the stranger who joined them on the road asked them what they were talking about, they told the incognito Jesus what they believed.

They said that they believed Jesus was a "mighty prophet." They had hoped that this Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel; they hoped he would be a military Messiah who would restore the kingdom of David and oust the Romans from power.

But, their hopes were dashed.

Jesus was condemned by the authorities and executed. Case closed.

Oh yes, there was a postlude to the story. There were some women who went to the tomb and found it empty. The women said that they saw a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive. Some of the other disciples confirmed the empty tomb part of the story.

But, none of the disciples saw Jesus or any angels. And they were certainly not willing to put their faith in an empty tomb and the testimony of some hysterical women. It seemed to these disciples that this story was an idle tale, the result of wishful thinking. They were too realistic to indulge themselves in that kind of thinking.

After all, it had been three days since all of this happened. In their minds that was long enough. It was time to move on.

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

And so, these two disciples, one named Cleopas and another not named, turned their backs on Jerusalem. The city of God no longer held any hope for them. They were headed for the village of Emmaus.

Scholars are not sure where Emmaus was located. Several villages today claim to be the original cite of Emmaus as a way of getting the tourist dollar. But, it doesn't make any difference.

We all know where Emmaus is located. It is that little place where discouraged disciples go. It is that out of the way, isolated village where these men would try to live out their lives and forget about the dream that didn't pan out.

I've met many people who were on the road to Emmaus in my time. I've met many people who, for one reason or another, felt like their hopes and dreams had not come true.

In some cases they had been disappointed by the betrayal of a friend. Perhaps they didn't get the opportunity to fulfill their vocational dream. Maybe they were overwhelmed by the death of a loved one.

Whatever the cause, these people have one thing in common. Their problem caused them to doubt. They doubted not only themselves and those that they hold responsible for the problem; they also doubted the goodness of God.

They all said what those first disciples said on the road to Emmaus,

"We had hoped ... but now, we're not so sure."

THE STRANGER'S LESSON

But, there was a stranger on the road to Emmaus who would not leave those first disciples on the road to despair. He put them on a different path by changing their way of thinking, by giving them a new set of presuppositions, the presuppositions found not in their heart of despair but in the heart of Scripture.

The stranger said,

"All of this is a fulfillment of Scripture. God has chosen to work through suffering and tragedy. God has chosen to bring salvation through a different kind of Messiah, a Messiah who dies for the sins of his people and is raised to life eternal to give them hope. The prophets all talked about it. Don't you remember?"

The stranger on the road to Emmaus still greets discouraged disciples along the way, and he still challenges them to re-evaluate their presuppositions. He tells them that hope is not found in power and conquest. Fulfillment is not found in realizing our fondest dreams.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no salvation in getting what we want when we want it.

Hope and fulfillment come from outside us. Hope and fulfillment are unexpected byproducts that come from following Jesus, taking up our cross and following him.

Hope and fulfillment come from the stranger on the road, the One who points us away from our own understanding and toward the eternal truth of God's word. In that place, where the Scriptures and the Spirit of the risen Christ meet, we find the Lord, the One that we cannot recognize in any other way.

He is so different from us. We would choose a path that leads away from the suffering and danger of Jerusalem. But, he bids us to go back, to take up a cross and follow a path that is more difficult and dangerous. He bids us to go back to Jerusalem and confront our fears as we also learn what it means to have an eternal hope.

SLOW TO BELIEVE

Jesus told those disciples long ago that they were foolish, that they were slow to believe the clear message of the prophets.

Is that not also true of us as well? Don't we try to run away or look away when the crucified Christ comes among us?

A message of suffering has never been a popular message. We would prefer to believe that Salvation comes in the form of a powerful political or religious leader, someone with "pizzazz", someone who captures the hearts and minds of the people.

I heard a priest explaining the elaborate vestments of the Roman Catholic Church as the funeral for the Pope was being conducted. Actually, it was very simple. They have a kind of color code in the Roman Church. Priests wear black, bishops wear purple, and the cardinals wear red.

The cardinals don't wear red because it is a showy color. It is supposed to represent the fact that they would be willing to sacrifice their life, shed their blood for the gospel if need be. In the early church, of course, this often happened.

But, the church historian went on to say that this had not always been remembered in the church. At other times in the past the cardinals were thought to be "princes" of the church and as such the red robes were treated like the red robes of royalty. Anytime they made their way through town all traffic stopped and people deferred to their power.

I thought to myself,
"How difficult it is for us to get away from the idea that salvation coming from power and self-fulfillment. Even our symbols of sacrifice are often changed into symbols of regal power and control."

This is true in all our churches, not just the Roman church. What we hope for always has a way of inserting itself into our conversation with

the Lord. Our presuppositions and desires and traditions always make it hard for us to hear the Lord's word and recognize the presence of Jesus among us

To put it another way, we are always looking for God in all the wrong places. We look for glory, but we do not look for glory in the way of the cross.

MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

In our lesson for today the risen Christ began with Moses and explained to the disciples why the Messiah must take the path of suffering. When I first saw that, I said to myself, "I'm not sure I know of any passages in the Law of Moses which speak of the Messiah, at least directly."

I was right. There are no passages that speak directly about the Messiah.

But, thinking about it another way, the whole sweep of biblical history is about how God took a time of suffering and transformed it into a time of glory. God's salvation always seems to come through a time of trial.

For example, Noah faced the rejection and ridicule of his people as he followed God's instruction to build the ark. Yet, it was through his difficult obedience that he and the world were saved.

The descendants of Abraham became slaves in Egypt. God sent his servant Moses to lead them to the Promised Land, but it was not an automatic or easy journey. To become the people of God they had to put up with the hardship of the wilderness.

Throughout her history, Israel's struggles led her to appreciate and understand the salvation of God. Through the tests and trials they became the unique people of God. Salvation and glory could only come through the struggle.

And that is what the prophets predicted about the Messiah as well. Mirroring the experience of God's chosen people; the Messiah would be a suffering servant. The Son of God would stand the test without wavering, and he would bring in the kingdom of God in a definitive and most glorious way. This was what Jesus had done.

THE BREAKING OF BREAD

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were impressed by the teachings of this stranger, and so they bid him stay with them that night since it was getting late. The hidden Jesus stayed, and they had supper together. And it was at supper that the disciples finally recognized Jesus.

The Scripture tells us that Jesus "took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." Luke 24:30-31 (NRSV)

The reference to the Lord's Supper is obvious. The disciples had already experienced a supper like this on the night of Jesus' betrayal, but now they understand for the first time the meaning of that supper. As Jesus breaks the bread they remember that his body was broken for them. Their eyes are opened to the significance of Jesus' ministry.

And that is why we take the Lord's Supper often. We, like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, do not easily embrace the way of the cross. We are puzzled and disturbed by the way that Jesus leads us. Sometimes we feel alone and discouraged.

But, this story teaches us that we will never completely understand the way of Jesus.

When the famous theologian, Karl Barth was a young pastor, he also wrote about the problem of our not being able to recognize God. He said that God is 'wholly other than' the god of our religion.

In other words, though we can embrace the way of Jesus by following him on the way to the cross, we can never completely understand that way. Before the cross we confront a God who leaves us speechless. How can our God suffer and die? Who is this God that brings glory through trouble and pain?

And that is why, when the disciples recognize Jesus is with them, he vanishes. Just when we think we've got Jesus all figured out -- he pulls a new trick.

THE LORD IS WITH US

We sometimes think that we meet the Lord in the Holy Places, at worship on Sunday morning for example. And that is true. But, this passage teaches us that the Lord is also with us at other times as well.

Quite often when we are struggling with the day to day trials of life, our tendency is to withdraw from the pain. We think that we alone are responsible for our lives and the jobs we are given to do.

The story of Emmaus teaches us that this is not true.

No matter where we walk, we do not walk alone. The Lord is with us every step of the way. And when we break bread, whether it is the bread of communion or just the toast we are eating for breakfast, we need to remember that the Lord is there with us, feeding us.

Each day, if we could only recognize it, He is there feeding us, not only with bread but also with the bread of life.

It is not always easy to recognize the Spirit of Christ. But, know this. Quite often we find him on the road to Emmaus. He is often closer to us when we are experiencing a moment of greatest despair. That stranger on the road, that fellow pilgrim might also be the one who embodies the Spirit of the risen Christ.

What was it the apostle Paul said?

"You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

BACK TO JERUSALEM

Those disciples were totally changed by this experience with Jesus. They not only see Jesus in a different way; they now see themselves in a different way. They are not ex-followers of a dead prophet; they are disciples of the risen Lord.

They were no longer on the road to Emmaus.
Now they were once again on the road that led to Jerusalem.

So, despite the lateness of the hour, they made that journey back to Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem their faith was strengthened by the testimony of others. They were not the only ones to see Jesus. The other disciples were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon."

The same thing needs to happen with us as well. When we meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus, that road of despair and hopelessness, we need to take his encouragement as a cue to return home. Like those first disciples, we too need to return home to Jerusalem. We need to return to the place where God's people proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is the place that gives meaning and hope to all that we do.

And strengthened by His Spirit, we are then called to go back into the world and proclaim the gospel to others. We are called to help others in their time of need to recognize that Christ is with them also, every step of the way.

Friends, God is always right in the middle of everything we are doing. God is at work in all the events and people who surround us. The risen Christ is as close now as He has ever been.

May God help us recognize Him and rejoice in His presence.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN