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"An Eye Opening Experience"

Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV)

[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.)

EYE OPENING EXPERIENCES

Have you ever had an eye opening experience? I love to hear people talk after they have completed a short term mission trip.

They are appalled at the economic hardship suffered by the people. And yet they are amazed at the joy, gratitude and spirituality of those same people. They often say,

“That was an eye opening experience. I will never be the same.”

In fact many of these people go back year after year. They encourage others to take the trip with them. They truly are changed by what they have seen.

Some of you may have seen the video clip of that humble, unemployed woman who lives in Scotland. She appeared on one of those shows where your singing is evaluated by some very judgmental judges.

If you win, you have a chance to make it big in the music industry. If you lose you are subjected to ridicule.

But, this lady didn't look like a music star. In fact she looked rather frumpy. You could see that the crowd and the judges were ready to be harsh in their evaluation.

But, then she began to sing.

After just a few notes the audience was transfixed by this woman's great talent. In a blink of an eye they went from cynicism and disbelief to whole hearted support. People learned to see her in a new way.

It was an eye opening experience.

This story reminded me that we are often blind to the beauty around us because we don't know where to look. Our perceptions are distorted by our assumptions and our fears.

And more importantly, often we can't see what God is doing in our world because our minds are not open to the possibilities.

We look and travel in only one direction.

We have a peculiar kind of blindness that keeps us from seeing Jesus even when he is with us every step of the way.

TWO FOR THE ROAD

I think that's what happened to those two disciples who were on the road to Emmaus so long ago. One was named Cleopas and the other was unnamed. But, the names don't matter. I can guarantee that in every church there are many people who are just like these disciples.

There are many people who want to believe and yet have been so discouraged by the troubles of this world that they have given up.

They are ready to pack up and “get out of Dodge” (or in this case Jerusalem).

Does that describe you?

If it does then you too are on the road to Emmaus. You too are headed toward that little town just outside the holy city.

Out of despair life has become an aimless journey to nowhere in particular.

That’s Emmaus.

BLIND SO THEY COULD SEE

You may have noticed that the Scripture says that these despairing disciples were “kept from recognizing Jesus.” I find that to be a curious phrase. Why were they “kept from recognizing Jesus?”

Did God blind them to the true identity of the stranger who joined them? Maybe. Sometimes God did “blind” people so that they could eventually see.

Do you remember the story of Paul on the road to Damascus? Paul was worried about a new group of Jewish heretics. This odd band of misfits followed a crucified Messiah named Jesus. Paul was afraid that this strange cult might terribly distort the Jewish faith.

That’s why he was on the road to Damascus. Paul was out to rid the ancient world of this terrible distortion of faith. Paul was like a horse with blinders on. His reality was determined by his assumptions. His preconceived ideas would only allow him to go in one direction.

And so there was only one way that God could get Paul off that narrow road and send him in another direction. God had to strike him blind. This was the only way that Paul could eventually see.

I think the same was true of those discouraged disciples who traveled the road to Emmaus.

FALSE HOPE

Even if the identity of the stranger who traveled with them that day had been revealed from the very beginning they wouldn’t have seen him, not really.

Why? Their assumptions about the Messiah were distorted. They had hope, but it was a false hope.

Did you notice how the incognito Jesus gets these discouraged disciples to voice what they believed about the Messiah? Jesus strolls up to them (and I think in a very cheery voice) asks, “What’s up?”

And the disciples are stopped stone cold in their tracks by the question. Don’t ever ask depressed disciples on the road to Emmaus “what’s up” unless you really want to hear.

Jesus gets an earful. Cleopas asks,

“What do you mean what’s up? Where have you been brother? Haven’t you heard? Have you just landed from Mars? Everyone knows what’s up in Jerusalem these days. Everyone is talking about it.”

And then with an exasperated sigh Cleopas tells the whole sorry story again.

“We thought Jesus was a prophet. He was mighty in word and deed. We had even hoped that he was the Messiah, the one who would come to redeem our country from these Roman butchers.

But, instead he was butchered. Our own leaders handed him over to the Romans, and he was crucified. It’s been three days now. Jesus is dead and gone and so are our hopes.

Oh yes there is something else. We really don’t know what to make of it.

Some of our women came and told us a foolish tale about the tomb being empty. They said angels proclaimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

But, we didn’t believe it.

We sent some of our men to check it out, and it was just as we thought. The women were hysterical. The tomb was empty, but Jesus wasn’t there. How could he be there? We know that he’s dead. It was grave robbers most likely; the final insult.”

It’s ironic isn’t it? These disciples are telling Jesus about Jesus! But, they’ve got the story wrong. Their hopes about Jesus were wrong because their understanding of Scripture was faulty. They concentrated totally on the glory of the coming Messiah without noticing the pain and suffering that are also a part of the story.

HOLY HEARTBURN

Jesus sets out to correct their misunderstanding.

Jesus said, “You guys are mixed up. Didn’t you go to Sabbath school when you were kids? Let me explain it to you?”

Then Jesus told the whole story again ... as he had done so many times before. He talked about a different kind of Messiah, a Messiah predicted by Moses and the prophets. He talked about a Messiah whose salvation would come through suffering and even death.

The disciples had indeed heard this before. Many times Jesus had told his disciples that his way was the way of the cross. Later we learn that their "hearts burned" as this incognito Jesus explained the Scriptures. There was something disturbingly familiar about the things that this stranger said. Yet still they did not recognize him.

But, their burning heart was the beginning of revelation. Their burning heart was the beginning of recognition. Soon they would know God in a new way, and their lives would never be the same.

In that regard I hope that you too can experience this kind of heartburn. When you are on the road to Emmaus, I hope a stranger comes up to you and stops you dead in your tracks.

I hope your hasty retreat out of town is stopped by an encounter with the Holy. I hope you are also encounter something sacred on your everyday journey.

We usually think that heartburn is something bad. And from a physical standpoint it is bad. When it comes to physical heartburn, give me that little purple pill so that I won't have to experience it any more.

But, from a spiritual standpoint heartburn can be good. Heartburn wakes us up and moves us in a different direction. Heartburn opens our eyes to the holy that is all around us.

In fact that's why we read Scripture carefully.

It's how we get holy heartburn. It's how God challenges our faulty assumptions. It's how the Spirit of the risen Christ enters our lives.

But, this kind of heartburn is not for the fainthearted. Our hearts can also be wounded by the call of Christ. Spiritual heartburn can also give us indigestion and even worse.

That's what we've been talking about all through Lent. Jesus was quite plain about this with his disciples. He told them that his way, the way of the cross, would be their way.

And he tells us the same thing.

There is only one cure for holy heartburn, this spiritual longing that comes from above.

It does not come in the form of purple pill or an easy fix of any kind. It comes from eating a meal, a special meal with the Savior.

You probably noticed how our story has an obvious connection with the Lord's Supper.

In fact, every time we take the Lord's Supper I read this passage. Do you remember?

[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; ... "

Luke 24:30-31 (NRSV)

I am called a minister of the Word and Sacrament. There's a reason for that. Those are our two main functions in the church.

John Calvin called the Word and Sacrament a means of grace. In other words, through the Word and Sacrament we experience the love and forgiveness of God.

Through the Word and Sacrament our eyes are opened, and we recognize that Jesus is among us.

A FLEETING GLIMPSE

But, our glimpses of Jesus are often fleeting and imperfect.

We see this in the last half of verse 31. This is a portion of the verse that we usually don't quote before we take communion. But, maybe we should. Verse 31 reads in its entirety, "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight."

This is another part of the story that gives some of us trouble. The risen Christ comes to these disciples incognito. And just when they recognize him; he vanishes!

Why didn't Jesus stick around to teach the disciples just a little bit longer? Why couldn't Jesus just let these discouraged disciples bask in the glory for just a few seconds more?

Did Jesus have some pressing appointment that required his presence elsewhere?

This quick disappearance is very curious. But, upon further reflection, the story of the vanishing Jesus does seem to mirror my experience.

From time to time in my life my heart has burned when some stranger has given me new insight into the Scriptures. From time to time I have felt the presence of Christ.

But, those experiences have always been fleeting. Those experiences have given me a tantalizing glimpse of glory, but the glory soon fades.

There is a spiritual retreat weekend that is called the "Road to Emmaus." I know that some of you have been to one of these events, and it has been very meaningful for you.

I haven't personally experienced this retreat, but I've heard many people talk about how much this brief weekend meant to them ... especially the last night when they took communion together.

But, this experience, like all religious experiences is a fleeting one. You may remember it with fondness. You may sponsor others so that they might have this experience.

But, the insight and glory of that moment cannot be recreated.

Have you ever wondered why it often happens this way? Why are we allowed only fleeting glimpses of the risen Christ? Why, when our eyes are finally opened by the Word and Sacrament does the risen Savior vanish so soon?

You may have noticed that most of the resurrection stories have this same theme. Those first disciples were not allowed to hang on to the risen Christ. His appearances to them were always disruptive and often quite brief. A phrase that is often used is that the risen Christ was going to go ahead of his disciples into Galilee as he said, as he promised.

In a few weeks we will read about the Ascension. In that story the disciples are pictured standing around looking up into the sky. Their encounter with the risen Christ was much too brief. They were still not sure about where they should go and what they should do.

It seems that the disciples were always having a hard time catching up to Jesus. You can see this theme in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul as well.

The Spirit of the living Christ always seems to be driving the disciples to new places and new opportunities to become ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

And maybe that's the point of the story.

Notice what happens when Jesus vanishes. The disciples are no longer on the road to Emmaus, the road of depression and fear. That very night they "got up and returned to Jerusalem."

This represents more than just a change in their location. It represents a change in their life. Even a brief encounter with the risen Christ was enough to make their hearts burn and their tongues sing.

Instead of wanting to be isolated now they wanted to be with other disciples. They wanted to tell the story. Communion with Jesus had led to a desire for communion with others.

These disciples had encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus, but in Jerusalem they came to understand that their story was only part of the story. Jesus had also appeared to Peter, and soon Jesus would appear to all the disciples.

THE STORY AND OUR STORY

In the Bible the fleeting appearances of the risen Christ draws the disciples together and keeps the story moving.

And it seems to me that the Spirit of the risen Christ serves that same function even today. None of us have the whole story when it comes to Jesus. We only have bits and pieces. God in Christ has designed the story so that we need each other.

We've talked many times about the image that Paul uses in his letter to the Corinthians. We are the body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it. But, none of us are self-sufficient. (See 1 Corinthians 12)

We cannot control the Spirit of the risen Christ. Sometimes for reasons that we cannot understand we spend a long time on the wrong road, and our eyes are kept from seeing that Jesus is with us.

At other times our hearts burn and we feel that Jesus is very near. We may even get a glimpse of his presence and glory.

But, we are not allowed to linger too long in one place.

There is something wondrous about the ambiguity of the resurrection appearances. In them we come tantalizingly close to the risen Christ, but there always seems to be more to the story. And there is.

As I said on Easter Sunday, the Story continues, and the Story is interwoven with our story.

Today we've read a story about a disciple named Cleopas, and another disciple who was unnamed. I suspect that now you probably know the name of that other disciple.

The other disciple is you ... or me.
Luke left a blank space for us to fill in our own names.

All of us who feel despair, all of us who have doubts, and all of us who have had our dreams shattered are on that road to Emmaus with Cleopas. But, quite often what we don't realize is that Jesus is on that road with us. Salvation is as close as the stranger who comes up beside us on the way.

There is one more thing in this story that is important. Do you remember when the disciples arrived at their destination? Jesus acted as if he would continue the journey alone.

But, those disciples invited the incognito Jesus to stay with them. In fact they urged him to stay. And their invitation made all the difference.

God has demonstrated his love for us in Jesus Christ. But, God's love is never coercive. Jesus will not force himself into our hearts.

We must welcome the stranger in. In the middle of our troubled life we must make a place for Jesus, and he will never disappoint. He will always come in.

And once he comes in we will never be the same again.

I love the way one commentator summarized our story. He wrote,

“The seeming tragedy of crucifixion was transformed into triumph. It was not after all, a hideous, heartbreaking mistake, but a rich heart-healing revelation of God's power and love!

Never again would their hearts be broken beyond repair. The divine healer had conquered even death.

And so my heart is filled whenever I read this story!”

Today I pray that our hearts may once again burn with hope and our eyes might be opened to the glory of God's forgiveness and salvation in Christ Jesus.

Amen.