

Luke 24:13-35

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.

SHE OPENED HER EYES

Back in January we were all still saddened by the Tucson shooting that targeted Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and left six people dead. President Obama faced the difficult task of putting a country’s grief into words as he spoke at a memorial service after the shooting.

Giffords was clinging to life at a nearby hospital, and during his speech the president gave an update on the Congresswoman’s condition. He reported that for the first time since the shooting she had opened her eyes.

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The crowd cheered. After days of bad news and grief, finally there was some good news to celebrate. As the cheers went on and on the President repeated his report, “Gabby opened her eyes for the first time. Gabby opened her eyes. Gabby opened her eyes.”

She was awake to the world around her. And even though the road to recovery would be long and difficult, she had stepped out of the darkness and into the light for the first time in a long time. She could see.

I think people are anxious to hear some good news. I think people are anxious to come out of the darkness of despair and hear some hope for the future.

That’s why the cheering went on for so long that day.

And that’s why our lesson from the Bible this day is so important. It teaches us where to find hope. It gives us a way to find light and life in our own difficult journey.

WHY DIDN’T THEY RECOGNIZE HIM?

But, this story of hope begins with darkness. The disciples on the road to Emmaus have their eyes closed. They do not recognize Jesus. He comes to them as a mysterious stranger on the road to Emmaus.

I wonder. Why didn’t the disciples recognize Jesus? Did you ever wonder why these disciples on the road to Emmaus didn’t know it was Jesus?

Of course not recognizing is a theme in many of the resurrection stories. For example, Mary didn’t recognize Jesus at the tomb until he spoke to her. She thought he was the gardener.

Now we can understand that story. She was at the graveside. She must have had tears in her eyes. Maybe the sun was coming up behind him. She never expected to see Jesus again.

But, those explanations don’t work in our lesson for today.

The Bible tells us that the incognito Jesus walked with these two disciples for a long time, long enough to give them a thorough interpretation of what the Hebrew Bible had to say about the Messiah.

If they didn’t recognize him it wasn’t because they had tears in their eyes or the sun was in their face.

There had to be some other explanation. And fortunately the Bible provides it. Luke tells us that they were “kept from recognizing him.” In other words it was God’s plan to prevent the disciples from recognizing Jesus, at least at first. But, that still leaves us with some other troublesome questions. Why does God keep the identity of Jesus hidden? What purpose does it serve?

SEEING AND NOT SEEING IN THE GOSPELS

The gospels are filled with this theme of seeing and not seeing.

Jesus heals many blind people in the gospels, but it is never just about the healing a person who is blind. It's also a powerful indictment of the powers that be.

The religious leaders think that they can see, but Jesus tells them they were like the blind leading the blind. "In fact," said Jesus, "it would be better if you were blind. At least then you would know that you needed help."

This was true not only for the religious leaders but also for Jesus' closest disciples. During the earthly ministry of Jesus they simply didn't see him. They didn't know who he was and what he was supposed to do.

I think this is seen most clearly in Mark's gospel. You may remember that in the gospel of Mark when Jesus heals someone he always says, "Keep this a secret. Don't tell anyone."

Why would Jesus do that?

It was because the people had their own understanding of what it meant to be a Messiah, and they didn't have it right. Jesus was not going to be a military leader who would help his countrymen revolt against the Romans. Jesus was going to be a suffering servant. He would die for the sins of the world on the cross.

His was not a message of armies and earthly glory. His was a message of grace and forgiveness. His kingdom was not of this world

Who could have seen that coming? Well, no one actually. And that's why even Jesus' own disciples often seem so clueless. Yes, they saw Jesus. They lived with Jesus twenty four seven. But, they never understood Jesus.

They always had their mouths open in amazement at what Jesus did and said. And sometimes they found what Jesus said and did to be absolutely terrifying.

A good example of this is when Jesus stilled the storm.

Jesus says, "Peace, be still." The storm quits. And then the disciples don't know what to think about Jesus. "Who is this?" they whispered among themselves. "He can even command the wind and the sea."

You see the same dynamic of fear as Peter, James and John go down the mountain upon which Jesus was transfigured. On that mountain God told the disciples that Jesus was his Son. They needed to listen to him. But, apparently even a voice from heaven wasn't enough to convince them.

Jesus predicts his passion, crucifixion and resurrection. And the disciples understandably have no clue what he's talking about. They wonder what "resurrection" might mean. But, they just ask the question among themselves. They are apparently too afraid to ask him any questions.

They don't see Jesus, and to a certain extent they don't want to see Jesus. Even their right answers are tinged with wrong assumptions.

When Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered for the disciples saying, "You are the Messiah, the son of God."

It was the right answer, but it was based upon a misunderstanding of the kingdom. When Jesus started talking about the cross and the resurrection, Peter rebuked him. And then Jesus rebuked Peter. In fact he called Peter Satan.

NOT SEEING JESUS TODAY

My point is to say that on some level the disciples always failed to see Jesus. Their assumptions about Jesus kept them from really seeing him even when he was alive.

And the same is true for us. Our assumptions about Jesus often keep us from really seeing him.

Like those first disciples we want to deify what we already believe. We have made Jesus into a general who goes before us into battle. We have made Jesus a person who confirms our particular moral and cultural preferences. We have said that believing in Jesus will make us rich.

In essence, we have turned the teachings of Jesus upside down in order to get what we want and justify our own actions. And this is not just something that we have done. The history of the church teaches us that this has been the mistake of every generation.

I think of the time that Jesus sat outside of Jerusalem and wept. He came to bring them a message of forgiveness and grace. He came to take them under his wing as a mother hen cares for her chicks. But, Jerusalem wouldn't listen. And neither would Athens or Rome or Moscow or Washington.

Jesus must weep today when he sees the largest congregation in our country proclaiming what one scholar rightly called "platitudes with attitude." There is no salvation in the revamped sayings of Benjamin Franklin. This is no salvation in the gains of Wall Street. There is no salvation in military action.

John tells us that Jesus is the "way, the truth and the life." Jesus is the only way to find salvation. But, what can God do with us when we refuse to see that way?

In the Book of Acts just before Jesus ascends into heaven, do you know what the disciples ask Jesus? “Lord is now the time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words they were asking, “Are you going to throw out the Romans and establish that political kingdom we’ve been wanting you to establish for so long?”

How can God get our attention when even a resurrection doesn’t do the trick?

SURPRISED BY GRACE

The answer is that Jesus comes among us incognito. Jesus keeps us from seeing him so that we can be surprised by grace. God sneaks up on us. God comes as the stranger who somehow seems familiar.

I think of that passage from Matthews’s gospel. It is the last judgment, and how are the people judged? They are judged by how they treated the incognito Jesus.

Jesus we learn is found in the least among us. When we treat others with compassion our eyes are opened. We learn that Jesus visited us in the stranger in need. (See Mathew 25:31-46)

Today’s story teaches the same lesson. The lesson for today tells us that when they got to Emmaus the incognito Jesus acted like he was going on down the road. But, the disciples asked this stranger to come and stay with them that night.

Think about that. If they hadn’t asked this stranger to come and stay with them, they would have never seen the risen Christ. How would you change if you really thought that the incognito Jesus traveled with you each day?

Jesus does indeed travel with us each day. Life is not just one thing after another. Life is a journey taken in faith. The life of faith, Abraham taught us is searching in the wilderness for the Promised Land. Life is trusting God even when our travels take us far from home, confident in the knowledge that God always goes with us come what may.

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

That’s an important point. Not only do the disciples eventually see Christ in the stranger; they also find Christ on the road to Emmaus. They find Jesus when their life is filled with bad news. They find Jesus when their hopes have been crushed.

These disciples on the road to Emmaus represent the road of broken dreams. Jerusalem is no long the city of hope. They are leaving in an attempt to escape the pain and the disappointment.

We see this in the way they talk to the incognito Jesus about what has happened. They said, “We had hoped that Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel. But, it didn’t work out that way.” The empty tomb was not a source of hope for these disciples. It was a metaphor for the emptiness in their hearts.

The Bible tells us that when Father Abraham wandered in the wilderness he was actually wandering in the Promised Land.

And I suspect the same is true for us.

When we are on the road to Emmaus, when we have abandoned all our proud hopes and find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness, we are in a position to meet the risen Christ. We are in a position to see Jesus in a way that we have never seen him before.

On the road to Emmaus we are ready to hear something new. On the road to Emmaus we are ready to give up our false hopes so that a new hope can be born. On the road to Emmaus we are finally ready to hear news that is truly good.

On the road to Emmaus, we hear the Scripture with hearts that burn; they burn with a fervent desire for salvation. On the road to Emmaus, the darkness of the setting sun gives rise to a new hope, a hope that penetrates the darkness and sets us on a journey in a new direction.

THE BREAKING OF BREAD

What was it that finally opened the eyes of the disciples? It was when Jesus broke the bread. And when he broke the bread their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

What is it about the breaking of bread that opens their eyes? It is a sacramental moment. It is a moment when the presence of Christ is recognized in a special way. Perhaps, they too knew of that last Passover meal when Jesus took the bread and broke it and said, "This is my body, broken for you."

Or perhaps this was their first experience with the sacrament. Either way this was more than a meal. It was bread from heaven. It was a meal for men who were spiritually starved.

In some churches I have served the elders did not want to take communion too often. They thought that if we took it more than quarterly we might take the sacrament for granted.

They had a point. We can take it for granted. We can become so familiar with the breaking of bread and the drinking of the cup that it becomes nothing more than a snippet of bread and a swig of juice.

But, I ask you. Is the problem our over familiarity with the sacrament or is it something else? I think that the real problem is our lack of understanding and preparation. We are blind to the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. We are blind to the fact that each day whether we break bread in communion or break bread in our homes it is a sacred moment. It is a time when Christ comes to us.

Have you ever noticed how the familiar parts of worship become more precious during the tough times? For example, when I am filled with anxiety about the present and the future, the words of familiar hymns come to mind.

Before trouble came my way the words went right past me. I sang them by rote. I knew the words, but I didn't feel the words.

But, during the time of struggle the words came to me in a new way. Instead of singing them by rote, I sang them by heart. It was as if I had my eyes opened to the importance of those words for the very first time.

Friends are you on the road to Emmaus. Do you feel blindsided by life? Do you feel like darkness is approaching, and you don't know what to do or where to turn?

Invite that stranger who seems so familiar into your home and into your heart. Listen once again to the words that you know by heart and yet are still mysteriously full of wonder and grace.

THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM

Jesus broke the bread, the disciples recognized him and then the Bible tells us that Jesus vanished from their sight. We sometimes find this to be perplexing. Why didn't Jesus stay around a bit longer? Why didn't he say more to these disciples? After all they were so discouraged and alone in the world.

But, after seeing the risen Christ, the disciples who used to be on the road to Emmaus, the road to despair knew exactly what to do. They changed direction. They got up in the middle of the night and made the journey back to Jerusalem.

And in Jerusalem they did not find a city filled with despair. Instead, in an upper room they found a band of disciples who had also been transformed by an encounter with the risen Christ. Their faith story was confirmed and strengthened by witness of the church.

FOUR LESSONS FOR THE JOURNEY

I think there are four very practical lessons that this passage teaches us about our spiritual journey.

First, God in Christ often finds us on the road to Emmaus. That is, in our despair we are often ready to hear and receive the truth of God's salvation.

Second, we must read the Scriptures to find the risen Christ. Come to God's word expecting to learn something new. If you are not looking for God's presence in Christ, you will not find it.

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Third, we see Jesus in the breaking of bread. Familiar actions and familiar words are transformed into a sacrament of grace by the spiritual power of God's grace revealed in Jesus.

And fourth, we must confirm and strengthen our faith by gathering with fellow travelers on this faith journey. Yes, the disciples in Jerusalem were by no means perfect.

We will see their imperfection many times in the rest of the story, The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the Apostle Paul. We will see their imperfection in the history of the church and in the history of the church today. We will see imperfection and faithlessness in our own lives.

But, their imperfection and ours does not allow us to give up on our brothers and sisters and go down the road to despair. We need each other. We need to come together.

Each of us has had a unique experience with the Spirit of the risen Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us that 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)

That is still true today. The walk of faith is not a lonely journey. It is a journey that we take with fellow believers. It is a walk we take with the Spirit of the risen Christ.

May God open our eyes.

Amen.