

SEEING EASTER

Third Sunday of Easter, a; May 8, 2011; Confirmation Sunday
Stephen R. Montgomery
Idlewild Presbyterian Church

LUKE 24: 13-35

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.

PRAYER

Open our eyes, O God, to truth hidden in the ordinary. Open our ears, so that in the midst of all the noise of our busy life, we might hear your word. And don't stop there: Open our spirits, so we might recognize you in common activities: the meals shared, the friendships enjoyed, the leisure time, this day and in the days of Easter ahead. Amen.

Some of you might have heard of Anne Lamott's story about a man getting increasingly drunk in a bar in Alaska. He's telling the bartender how he recently lost whatever faith he'd had after his twin engine plane crashed in the tundra.

"Yeah," he says bitterly. "I lay there in the wreckage, hour after hour, nearly frozen to death, crying out for God to save me, praying for help with every ounce of my being, but he didn't raise a finger to help. So I'm done with that whole charade."

"But," said the bartender, squinting an eye at him, "you're here. You were saved."

"Yeah, that's right," says the man. "Because finally some ... *Eskimo* came along"¹

Well, yes. The longer I live the more it seems to me that moments of grace and help and rescue happen all the time in our lives, if only we have eyes to see them. But *that*, of course, it precisely the problem. Too often our eyes are clouded by so much bad that is going on in the world and in our lives — clouded by despondency and despair, sadness and grief, that we tend to lose sight of what is going on around us. As a result we miss a lot, and sometimes we even miss the holy in our midst, especially if the holy comes disguised as, say, an Eskimo, or a stranger on the road.

I wonder if that's why all of the post-resurrection appearances of the Risen Christ in all four gospels are so ... understated, unglamorous, with so little fanfare. I wonder if it's because the disciples simply could not see beyond their own loss and grief. Even though Jesus had told them to expect the resurrection, they simply were incapable of doing so. They were too absorbed in death, defeat, despair, disappointment, and the other grief reactions of life.

In today's story from Luke's version we simply have two people walking along a road, just wanting to get away from it all. We know one was named Cleopas, but we don't even know the name of the other one. Some suspect that it might have been his wife. Or a maybe it was a friend. We don't know. Knowing Luke, great storyteller that he was, he might have intentionally left the name out so that we could find ourselves in this story — whenever we wanted to get away from it all.

They are on their way to Emmaus. There's a funny thing about Emmaus. No one knows where Emmaus is. It's not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, even though it is only seven miles from Jerusalem. Even today, with all of our new archeological techniques, biblical archeologists have not been able to uncover Emmaus.

Maybe Luke, great storyteller that he is, was saying that he knew that all of us have been on that road before; a road that we have travelled on when we wanted to get away from a situation that had become unbearable. Maybe Emmaus is wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred; that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay. Anywhere we go to try to forget.²

Now even though we are two full weeks removed from Easter Sunday, we need to remember that this story is Easter day, that "first day of the week" when the women went to the tomb at deep dawn. It is late in the day now, and they cannot hide their cumulative fatigue and disappointment. The daylight is fading into evening, and the sun is nearly set, not only on this day, but on their best hopes and deepest longings. "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel," they say as they are joined by a stranger.

"We had hoped ... we had hoped." We know something about dashed hopes, don't we? There are so many people both in scripture and in everyday life, who have hoped, longed for and waited for a promise to be fulfilled, a potential to be realized, a possibility to become a reality, and who wait patiently still, hoping against hope, believing against all odds."

Abraham and Sarah, whose waiting became more than they could bear? Or the prodigal's father, waiting day after day, keeping his eyes on the horizon, hoping against all odds he might see his son.

And there is you. What have you hoped for in faith, only glimpsed from afar, or maybe never seen any sign of yet? That you would find some tenderness and meaning in your friendship or in your marriage? That your adult child would find some measure of purpose and vocation? That the pain your loved one is experiencing would somehow relent? That you would get sober and this time stay that way? That the word "remission" would be replaced by "cure?" What is your great hope?

I have been on that road. The road of disappointment. The road of judgment reached too early. The road of broken dreams, at the intersection of what is and what might have been. And its my guess that you have been there too.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "It is the road you walk when your team has lost, your candidate defeated, your loved one has died — the long road back to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again."³

They keep talking and walking, somewhat astounded when this stranger asks them what they are talking about. "Who are you, Rip Van Winkle, that you don't know all that has happened in Jerusalem over the last few days?" So they tell him everything that has happened to him. (Note to self: Don't ever tell Jesus what he already knows!)⁴

He begins to give them their first Sunday school bible lesson. He explains the meaning of the scriptures that say that the Messiah should suffer and enter into his glory. He recounts Moses and the prophets and interpreted all the things about himself in all the scriptures. They talk and walk some more, but they get to the village to where they were going (and Luke doesn't say it was Emmaus, just "the town where they were going), he starts to go on, but Cleopas and the other disciple ask Jesus to stay with them, break bread with them, rest with them. He does.

And then it happens. He takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it, and their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. It was sitting at table, in community, that did it — reminded them of his presence with them all those times he broke bread with them; not just in the upper room, but on the seashore feeding thousands, in the home of tax collectors and outcasts. And all of a sudden they the scales of disappointment and despair and grief lifted from their eyes. Much more happened than the feeding of their hunger.

Madeline L'Engle, in the journal she kept as her husband was dying, remembers that day when he first proposed to her, remembers that he quoted Conrad Aiken's poetry:

*Music I heard with you was more than music.
And bread I broke with you was more than bread.*⁵

Bread, you see, was more than just bread! It had the power to open eyes, and there they recognized Jesus. Moments earlier he was just a stranger with an unknown face, a perfect stranger, if you will.

Instead of not seeing Jesus anywhere, the disciples began to see and feel him everywhere! Instead of an absolute absence, he became for them a total and real presence. They were wandering down a road to Emmaus, around a corner, and there he was. They sat at table in the afternoon to eat, and suddenly he was there with them! They were back at work fishing at the sea of Tiberius, and there was Christ standing on the shore! They were huddled in fear in a closed room, and all of a sudden, there was Jesus! The one they expected to see nowhere is suddenly seen everywhere!

Who knows today when it might happen to us, when we recognize Christ in our midst. In the face of a dear friend, or perhaps a stranger on the road, or the face of the person sitting next to us in the pew — or maybe even in the face of an Eskimo. Sometimes it happens when we have little or no expectations and we are weary; but it happens in simple acts like the breaking of bread, or a mother's caress, or the sprinkling of water on a baby's forehead. Or maybe ... well, let me tell you how it worked for me recently.

The previous week before this one was a hard one for me. I was on my way to Emmaus. I had been disappointed in fellow pastors who led their churches out of the presbytery. I heard the disappointment and grief of some longtime very loyal members of those churches. I had hoped, oh how I had hoped. And so I walked and walked, going nowhere, getting away from it all. And then Tuscaloosa and Smithville and all of those little towns suddenly were devastated by those storms, leaving nothing but death and destruction. I contacted some of my friends there and they were alive, but ... I kept walking, walking, head hanging a little lower.

We had church, and fortunately I didn't have to preach. Three high school senior young women helped me at least have a glimpse of the Risen Christ in my midst. But I could not savor the experience. I had to run up to hear the faith stories of those in the confirmation class. Sixteen of them — oh my. I was tired. And then one got up to speak, and in her own words, recounted what her faith meant to her. My eyes were no longer glossed over with weariness. And then another one, and then another one. I began to see what was right before, but I hadn't recognized. One after another, not using the old safe standard formulas, but expressing in their own words who God was, explaining wondrously what Jesus meant to them; exploring the mystery of how the Holy Spirit works; and how we are the church — together. And how we find Jesus in service to others. And friends, my eyes were opened, and I recognized the Risen Christ, right there in that upper room.

As a result of that experience on the road to Emmaus 2,000 years ago, the contagiousness of that first Easter spread like wildfire. And I hope that each of you will be able to continue to join in serving the risen Christ and helping people to come to life again and to live beyond fear, even the fear of death. For Easter is, in one sense, the time when Death screams, "He is dead, gone and buried!" And God shouts back a resounding, "No! Look, he is alive and let loose into all the world. And there, whenever you see people coming to life, living beyond fear, embracing the future, celebrating the present, there your eyes will be opened and you will recognize Him."

A city fellow came to a fork in the road; signs pointed to his destination in both directions. Undecided about which road to take, the man shouted to a farmer who was working in a nearby field: "Hey, does it make any difference which road I take?" The old man shouted back, "Not to me, it don't!"⁶

Well, it may not seem like a big deal to a world used to darkness, but for the church the choice of the following the light of the Risen Christ is the way to the fullness of life itself. Christ is alive! He is among us now. And because he is alive, we can be too, more alive than we've ever been before.

So friends, open your eyes. You must might see Easter again and again and again!

Amen.

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¹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some thoughts on faith.* New York: Anchor Books, 1999. P. 117

² Frederick Buechner, "The Road to Emmaus," *The Magnificent Defeat*, New York: Seabury Press, 1979. pp. 84-86.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Blessed Brokenness," in *Gospel Medicene*, (Cambridge: Crowley, 1995) p. 20-21.

⁴ Jon Walton, "The Blessedness of Brokenness," First Presbyterian Church, New York., April 13, 2008.

⁵ Madeline L'Engle *Two-Part Invention*, cited by Robert E. Dunham, University Presbyterian Church, April 10, 2005.

⁶ Robert E. Dunham, "Seeing with Easter Eyes, University Presbyterian Church, April 3, 2005.