

Stay With Us
Luke 24:13-35
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Luke 24:13-35:

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. 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?' 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, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 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. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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. When he was at the table with them, he 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. 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?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

I was at a candlelight meditation group one evening this week, feeling so peaceful and calm, grateful and filled. Suddenly, I heard a purring, growling noise behind me, and then footsteps prancing behind and then around me and I opened my eyes and wondered, "Who brought the cat? Why is the cat at the meditation group? I've never had a cat, I don't know much about cats, what if the cat jumps on me? Are there

always cats at the meditation groups?" I became tense, cautious, on guard. None of the other meditators opened their eyes. They all sat calmly as the black cat moved around the space weaving in and out of the chairs.

Then I remembered the cover quote that I had just selected for the service this week, "Do not neglect hospitality to strangers, for by this some may be entertaining angels without knowing it," and I considered that this cat may, perhaps, be an angel, a messenger from God, the definition of angel. And my whole countenance shifted from one of fear back to one of faith.

What if the cat is here for a reason? What if the cat is here for me or someone else to learn something? I was able to breathe again, my shoulders relaxed, and my mind went still, aware of the cat, conscious of the cat, and also peaceful and open, welcoming the cat in the room with me and us meditators.

In the Gospel passage today, Cleopas and another disciple are leaving Jerusalem later in the day on Easter, heading home to Emmaus. They are deeply depressed, their hopes dashed. Their Savior has been killed and is now missing from the tomb, and the women reported that angels said Jesus was still alive. They are discussing and debating these things, when a man walks up to them: a stranger, unrecognizable as Jesus.

The passage says, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him," and we are not told exactly how or why this is so. Did God temporarily blind the disciples? Were they blinded from their distress, their eyes so filled with tears they couldn't see him properly? Or maybe, resurrected, Jesus physically looked different? We don't know. We only know that they did not recognize him as Jesus, but as a stranger. "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place?" they ask him. "What things?" Jesus that they don't know is Jesus asks.

Cleopas and the other disciple answer that the prophet Jesus of Nazareth was given the death sentence by the religious leaders and crucified. Then they say what David Lose calls the "saddest words in Scripture: We had hoped. 'We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel', they say. We had hoped he would free us from captivity to the Romans. We had hoped for a different kind of Savior....

How often do we find ourselves in this same state: We had hoped the child would recover. We had hoped the job would last. We had hoped we didn't have to move to another place to live. We had hoped the relationship could have been repaired. We had hoped that the cancer would go into remission. We had hoped.

Jesus comes along side these heartbroken disciples and asks them to name their loss. And then Jesus listens. Before he talks or explains or teaches, he listens. Like the psalmist in the psalm read today says, "I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on

him as long as I live.” It is important to Jesus that the disciples name their pain, grief and loss before moving beyond them. It is important to him, then, that we do, too.

In order to transcend our pain, we must name it so that it becomes separate from us. So that the pain and grief is no longer what defines us or overshadows us. When we name it, then God can come in and transform it. This is why we say the prayer of confession each week. We don’t jump straight to the glory and celebration and bypass the pain in our lives. We name it and invite God in to do something with it. To partner with us in transformation so we don’t stay stuck in the grief and pain.

David Lose points out that the disciples are disappointed partly because they misunderstand how God is working to save the world. They expected a warrior God, and they were given a suffering God. A God of vulnerability.

And it is just this suffering, vulnerable God that is able to meet us where we are and come along side us and be with us and know what we’re going through firsthand. I want to acknowledge the beauty and power in the vulnerability shared in the Lenten reflections this season. How Jim, Bonnie, Helen, Ginger and Tani shared their faith with us and gave us their testimony of how God has worked in their lives, some sharing first the doubt, pain, struggle. They had the powerful vulnerability to share with us, and we listened and we were all transformed. We are thankful to these members for demonstrating for us this God-given gift of vulnerability and testimony.

My cousin, Kate, shared with me this week her disappointment in the changes in her neighborhood in San Francisco, where she has lived for 30 years. She said the sidewalks have been widened, to promote more walking and less driving, which seems like a good thing, right? The hope for more community, more interaction and fresh air, less exhaust, less fumes, less noise, less metal?

Kate said she thought she would mellow with age, that she would become more easygoing and tolerant. Kate said that the sidewalk is wide enough for 6 people now, and she has made a decision to stop stepping out of the way to avoid bumping into people looking at their cellphones. This has caused quite a few collisions. Fortunately, no fights.

She said she couldn’t do it anymore, she couldn’t keep dodging and sidestepping the people unaware of their surroundings because of their cellphone addictions. She grieves. She grieves the loss of walking down the street and looking people in the eye with a smile and an acknowledgment of one another, on the same road.

I don’t watch TV much but I heard about a commercial that advertises screens for everything. A screen everywhere, not just the wall anymore! Do we need more electric screens? Screens on the refrigerator, screens in the restaurant, screens on the seatbacks, screens on the gas pumps? They’re already in our hands 24/7, why do we need more? Will they be on the trees next? On the side of Mt. Tam? On the

sidewalks as we're walking? On the lampposts and streetlights so we don't, heavens to Betsy, "miss anything?"

The sad thing is that the screens are often the cause of our missing things. Of our missing the person right in front of us, talking to us at the dinner table or walking by us on the street. We think smartphones are providing us with more connection but we are less connected from the living, breathing people right next to us.

I'll admit I had screen envy when a church in our presbytery hosted a quarterly meeting and the screens magically descended on either side of the cross to show the prayers, the lyrics of the hymns, and some beautiful scenery and photos to go with the sermon. I thought about how we could potentially have screens like this here, and no sooner was I devising a plan that the president of the seminary noted how people need a place to go on Sundays where there are no screens. Where they have a relief, a respite, a sabbatical from screens. And I agreed, wholeheartedly.

The Gospel story today would look a lot different in today's world. Would Cleopas and the other have been talking as they walked together, or would they have been distracted from one another, perhaps looking for directions on their smartphone or texting or answering a call? Would they have missed Jesus, the stranger, walking beside them?

Jesus as stranger walks with the disciples, asks them to name their pain, listens, and then, only then, does he share the spiritual truths of the Scriptures with them, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, interpreting Jesus' part in them. That suffering was not defeat of the Savior, but the necessary pathway to new life. They still don't know that the man talking is Jesus. He is still a stranger, though perhaps a little less so.

They come to the village of Emmaus and Jesus walks on ahead, as the disciples have reached their destination. They are home, having walked the 7 miles from Jerusalem. They easily could have veered off into the sunset, tired, confused, worn, wanting to go to eat and head straight to bed. They could have. We can, too. We can go our own way and let Jesus walk on.

Jesus' love is such that we are free to turn our backs and walk away. Instead, as Jesus walks on, they call him back; they don't want to part ways. "Stay with us," they say. "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." They could have let him just walk on, and gone back to their lives. Jesus doesn't force himself upon them. "Stay with us," they say.

They invite him in, this stranger who is actually Jesus but they don't yet know it. And as Jesus always does, he stays when invited. He abides with us whenever and wherever we ask.

At the table, Jesus takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it, and gives it to them. It is now that they see. Their eyes are opened and they recognize him. We read this story from Luke in Compassionate Kids this week, and afterwards asked, "Why do you think the disciples recognized Jesus when he broke the bread?" and without one second delay, a 5 year old reverently and confidently answered, "Because he had done it before." *YES, exactly.*

Another child recalled how, indeed, Jesus had done this with the disciples at the Last Supper, the last meal with them before his death. He had also broken the bread in this way when he fed the multitudes, turning a loaf of bread into enough to feed thousands. The disciples recognized this action of Jesus. Jesus taking the bread, blessing it, breaking it, sharing it. The disciples invite him in to stay and he is revealed.

Like with Mary Magdalene, who eventually recognizes him outside the empty tomb, Jesus doesn't physically stay. The passage today says that no sooner was he recognized that he vanished from their sight. But he does not leave them abandoned, as they had felt with his death, walking on the road. They are not forlorn this time he leaves.

Instead, they are focused, energized, enlightened, recalling that they had felt their hearts burning within as he had spoken with them on the road, opening the meaning of the Scriptures to them. And so they race back the 7 miles to Jerusalem, to find the others and tell them that what the women had said is true. "The Lord is risen indeed!" He showed up on the road and was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. After they had invited him in.

A colleague shared with me this week that she has been suffering from a sore back and has taken to lying on the couch with a heating pad for relief. This week, her teenage son came in the room and they had a discussion about stress, about his perception of academic stress versus social stress, and they related to one another on a level they had never gone before.

The mother was vulnerable, and otherwise unoccupied on the couch, and asked the opening question to her son, and then listened, providing no solution, answer, or advice. Together then, they looked up and out the window and noticed the wind blowing, a windstorm, shaking the eucalyptus trees with such power and beauty.

The story reminded me of Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The undistracted Jesus open and available to listen to the concerns of the disciples, and the connection that was fostered by a presence, like the wind of the Holy Spirit, that blows where it will. The son recognized his mother as someone he could trust and share, someone he wanted to invite in to his world. Someone with whom he wanted to stay.

Wherever life is at work to renew, heal and restore there is a response that we are called to make. We can ignore it and go about our lives as if it doesn't matter, or we can seek to be a part of the life-giving work of God. We can walk with Jesus on the road to Emmaus and then let him walk on, or we can invite him in for a meal. We can stay alone and amazed at the Christ we've encountered, or we can run back into community and share what we've experienced, drawing others into God's life.

The good news today is that we are able to participate with Jesus in what God is doing in the world. The disciple with Cleopas on the road to Emmaus is not named, thus allowing us to insert ourselves, our own names into the story. How will we respond to the stranger who appears among us? How does God want us to participate, to notice, to communicate and spread God's life-giving work in the world today?

Let us pray:

Elusive God, companion on the way, you walk behind, beside, beyond; you catch us unawares. Break through the disillusionment and despair clouding our vision, that, with wide-eyed wonder, we may find our way and journey on as messengers of your good news. Amen.