

SLD04.06.08 Third Easter
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 24: 13-35
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Seein’ Jesus”

“So we’re walking down the road to Emmaus and this guy joins us. Only we don’t know who he is – just some guy going along the same road we are. And Cleo and I, we’ve just been talking about what all’s been going on here of late, and this guy says, ‘What’s up with all that?!’ And we can’t believe he hasn’t heard about what’s happened – I mean but apparently he hasn’t. So we tell him all about how Jesus died and was buried and then his body disappears and some people thought they saw angels.

“And you know what he says to us, this guy who hasn’t even heard the latest? He says, ‘You fellows are so foolish.’ Yeah, like WE’RE stupid. Then he launches on this whole holy history lecture starting back with Moses and bringing us up to yesterday, like we hadn’t heard it all before, about a thousand times. Still, his jawboning passed the time – I mean, it’s seven miles to Emmaus – so we just let him blether on the whole durn time.

“So we get to Emmaus and it’s almost suppertime, so even though we’ve had about enough of the one-sided conversation, Cleo and I thought maybe, if this guy was raised right, he wouldn’t talk with his mouth full. So we got him to take a break and eat with us.

“And then, you won’t believe it...I mean, you’re not going to believe this. When we started eating we suddenly recognized who the guy was! I mean, you’re not going to believe it. I mean, WE could hardly believe it. You know who it was? It was Jesus

all along! The stranger on the road! The one walking with us. The one flapping his lips about all the prophets since Moses. The whole time! It was Jesus all along!

“I mean, we KNOW Jesus! But somehow it wasn’t until we sat down at the table with him and he took the bread we were fixing to eat, and blessed it and broke it, and gave it to us, that our eyes were opened and we recognized him! Can you believe that?

“Cleo and I couldn’t believe it. I mean, we did, but we wouldn’t have if we hadn’t seen it with our own eyes! But there it was, Jesus H. Christ, sitting right there at the table with us munching matzoh. It was so funny ‘cause we’d just been letting him in on the news...about himself! Ha! No wonder he called us stupid!

“(Though I don’t really think that’s all that nice, you know, for a Messiah to call people names just because they don’t get him.)

“Still, the joke really WAS on us and it WAS pretty funny.

“But then, here’s another one: you’ll never guess what happens next. This is so weird. The minute we see who Jesus is, the minute we catch on to who’s been walking with us the entire time...POOF! The guy disappears again! I mean, what’s up with THAT?!

“Well, as you can imagine, it takes me and Cleo a minute or two to kind of catch up with what’s just happened: Jesus here, Jesus not here. But once we finally caught our breath and had a chance to think over it all, we remember that the whole time Jesus had been talking to us on the road, we’d felt this burning in our hearts. Cleo’d thought it was the burritos we ate last night and so did I. But now we get it! It wasn’t the hot taco sauce; it was the Holy Spirit! Ha!

“So we head on back to the city to tell the others what had happened on the road and how we recognized Jesus when we broke bread together.”

Has that ever happened to you before?

I don't mean have you ever hiked the road to Emmaus. But have you ever just been tooling along whatever path life takes you on, imagining you're on your own, or just with whoever shows up around you, without any clear idea how the present moment fits in the larger picture until a whole lot later when you look back on it?

That's how it was for these two disciples of Jesus.

It isn't that they don't know Jesus, or haven't recognized him before. They're already his disciples! In fact, they'd placed their future hopes on him. But they're so sad and distracted by his death, or self-absorbed, or lost in the moment, or whatever, that they don't recognize Jesus when he's right there beside them. For seven miles. And supper.

Ever been so sad, or distracted, self-absorbed, or lost in the moment or whatever not to notice, or recognize, the risen Jesus' presence with you?

Or maybe Jesus arranges that whole scenario on purpose, for shock value. Or as a practical joke. It's possible. Or maybe he's just setting up these two, especially with his disappearing act at the end, as object lessons for any of us latter-day disciples who imagine we've got a handle on Jesus.

This and other equally confusing post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples all seem to convey that the risen Jesus is sort of “around,” in one form or another, all the time. If not in the form of a first century Palestinian male Jewish rabbi,

then in whatever form his followers might, if they were paying attention, or their hearts were open, or they were given the gift of sight, might recognize.

In fact, in the gospel of John, Jesus remarks that it is to his disciples' advantage that he is "going away," because only then can he send in his stead the Advocate, the Helper, the Spirit of Truth, to do all the teaching and guiding and transforming in his place. (Jn 16: 7) Reckon Jesus had a hunch that a first century Palestinian male Jewish rabbi wouldn't always and forever be the handiest form for folks to relate to? Or maybe that there'd never be ANY single divine form or manifestation that could always be counted on to open people's eyes and transform their hearts, so for maximum coverage, flexibility and reach, he'd send the Holy Spirit? That way Jesus could be with everybody all the time, and nobody could claim that THEIR way of seeing or experiencing the risen Christ was absolutely, positively the best and only way that anybody else could see or experience God.

To me this was, and is, a brilliant plan. Though it sure puts the onus on you and me to be both humble and alert – a tricky tension for us Jesus-followers.

Because if it's true, as the gospels say, that the risen Jesus is in fact all around us all the time, in one form or another, and neither you nor I or any other follower of Jesus Christ gets to say for sure just how or when Jesus will reveal himself, then it's incumbent upon us to be humble about our creedal pronouncements, and as wide-eyed and alert as we can as we scan, scan, scan our worlds for Jesus' presence. As we pan the landscape of our lives for, as Buechner describes it, "the occasional, obscure

glimmering through of grace. The muffled presence of the holy. The images, always broken, partial, ambiguous, of Christ.”¹

And because our revelations of Jesus are so often partial, obscure and ambiguous, one of the reasons for coming to worship every Sunday is, as far as I’m concerned, to fine-tune our scanning equipment.

Oh, sure, we come to glorify God and say “hey” to one another. But the way I see it, the whole rhythm and experience of reformed worship is designed to draw in our various faculties and sort of tumble them around in a kind of divine washer/dryer combo, and return them to us all clean and folded and ready to wear.

Think of worship as a sort of Chinese laundry. Or a spiritual car-wash. Or, like that optimizing feature on your computer that reorders data in order to make more room for new stuff. You get the idea.

I know a lot of worship feels routine, and some of it, maybe unnecessary. Or you go through the paces even if nothing much connects. But SOMETHING’s happening when we show up to worship God that isn’t dependent on our approval or enjoyment or even understanding. Once in a while a word, a note, a phrase, a song, a moment of silence, will just reach out and grab you. Or reach in and change how you see a thing later.

Every Sunday, after shuffling through an entire week of fielding demands on our time and energy, and imagining that we’re either laboring on our own, or only have each other, we show up here in this sanctuary and start going through the paces.

¹ Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, p.81.

First we get called to worship. The leader says, “blah, blah, blah,” and we say the “**blah, blah, blah**” in bold, this week ending with “**Surely, God’s love in Christ is with us.**”

Then we sing the opening hymn of praise – “Good Christians All, Rejoice and Sing,” which has plenty of “allelulias” and words like “victory” and “triumph” and “uplifted hearts” that generally feel slightly forced before twelve noon, especially after a night like last night. Still, God deserves praise for creating everything. Even if a lot of it IS pretty much a mess, there are still the dogwood blossoms and the Grand Canyon and grilled cheese sandwiches and the tears and joy in Elise’s eyes at her wedding.

On to confession – how come we have to DO that every Sunday? Anyway, those words don’t speak for me and my peccadillos; they must be written for somebody else. But hmm, how *did* I mess up this week? Did I hurt anybody? Beat up on myself? Notice God?

Then we get to share what we’re worried about during joys and concerns; at least the worries we’re willing to talk out loud about. And then we pray, and then we remember our baptism, and then we listen to scripture.

Reading one: blah, blah, blah, futile ways...blah, blah, purify your souls...blah, blah, blah...love, heart, born anew.

Reading two: blah, blah, blah happened, and then Jesus said, blah, blah, blah, and then their eyes were opened. And then Jesus disappeared.

The sermon: retelling of scripture, meaning of scripture, relevance of scripture, joke about scripture, meaning of scripture. To the glory of God. Amen.

More singing. Then we say what we believe: this, and this, and this, and the other, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

We take up an offering. The choir sings. We're invited to commune with Jesus.

When Jesus broke the bread with his disciples, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. When Jesus breaks with us, will our eyes be opened? Will we recognize Jesus among us? Will our hearts burn? If not, will we keep looking? If so, will we tell others?

Think of worship as a process, an experience, that makes a stab at reminding, realigning, retooling, something in our spiritual radar, to help us better to scan our lives throughout the week for the presence of God. That enhances our capacity for picking up the broken, partial and ambiguous images of Christ with which we are surrounded; the muffled presence of the holy, the occasional glimmering through of grace in our lives.² For a moment, anyway. That is, until, he vanishes again. Still, do not our hearts not occasionally burn within us?

To the glory of God. Amen.

² Ibid. p. 81.