

SLD04.30.06 Third Easter
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 24:36-48
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"God's Beloved Blockheads"

Here it is the third Sunday of Easter and Lectionary brings us to the chaotic days shortly after Jesus' death, his followers still trying to sort out what happened to Jesus, and what *will* happen to them. Today's passage from the 24th chapter of Luke places us smack in the middle of the story, beginning, as it does, with the words: "while they were talking about this..."

'They' are the disciples, and the *'this'* they are discussing is the news just brought to them by their companions who had just been traveling along the road to Emmaus. You remember – two men were walking along the road commiserating over Jesus' death and the odd disappearance of his body when a stranger approaches and asks them what they're talking about. The stranger, of course, is Jesus, though the disciples don't recognize him. And *because* they don't recognize him, the two men proceed to fill Jesus in on everything that's recently happened.

"...and then, they crucified him; that was three days ago. And when some women went to the tomb to tend to his body, it wasn't there! The women said they saw some angels or something, but we didn't believe 'em so we went to check for ourselves. And what do you know but that, sure enough, Jesus' body really **was** missing! 'Course we're not so sure about the angels – you know women.... But what can explain the disappearance of Jesus' body except grave robbers? But, oh, that just breaks our hearts. Surely you've heard all this already – if not, you'd be the *only* one in Jerusalem.

And on the disciples prattle to their Savior, gospel irony just dripping from the

pages. Until finally Jesus interrupts: “Come *on*, guys! Why are you acting so clueless? Don’t you remember what the prophets said? How the Messiah would go through all kinds of suffering and rejection and death to get to his glory? Don’t you remember that?”

The disciples stare at Jesus blankly. So...Jesus starts from scratch, proceeding to interpret everything that’s happened from Moses to the cross. Which is a lot of territory - takes the whole seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus to cover it.

Meanwhile, they finally get to Emmaus, and it’s supptime. Jesus makes as if to keep on going but the two disciples, apparently pleased with this *stranger’s* company, pleads with him to stay and share a meal. Jesus agrees and sits down to the table with his disciples. Before they dig in, he takes the bread and blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them, and then, and only then, their eyes are opened and they recognize him.

Before Jesus opens their eyes, the disciples don’t have a clue – about him, about his purpose, about his death, or his subsequent ‘disappearance.’ But after Jesus opens their eyes, they get it.

And when they do, the disciples become jubilant about what they have seen, and proceed to reframe their experience for one another: ‘Hey now, come to think of it, our hearts **were** burning within us while Jesus was talking to us on the road, weren’t they. I *knew* there was something about that fellow....”

And back the whole seven miles to Jerusalem, the disciples rush to tell everyone what they’ve experienced.

“Guess what, guys! You’ll never believe it! We just saw Jesus! No kidding! Just a little while ago! In Emmaus. Well, really, he was on the road with us from here

but we didn't recognize him at first, but then we sat down and had some supper together and then we *did* recognize him – it's hard to explain – but then he disappeared, and? "while they were talking about these things... **Luke 24:36-42.**

Okay, now anything strike you as odd about the disciples' initial reaction to Jesus? At least from those two who just ran a quarter marathon back to Jerusalem? The ones whose eyes had just been opened?

I mean, here Jesus shows up again - same day, same disciples - yet now they're 'startled and terrified?' Convinced they're seeing a ghost? Hmmm. Suddenly we're back to 'before,' aren't we. *Before* the disciples' eyes were opened, *before* they recognized Jesus, *before* they grasped the meaning of his death, *before* they had a clue about who he really is.

"Peace be with you" remarks this very present Jesus to his recently eye-opened disciples. And you'd kinda expect them to say..."and also with you." wouldn't you? With the two breathless fellows from Emmaus grinning and sort of nudging each other and saying, "Huh? What'd we say? Did we call it or what?"

I mean, they'd just been on fire with their good news of Jesus' resurrection ("were not our hearts burning within us?") Wouldn't you expect from those two a certain gleeful satisfaction?

But, no, Jesus appears and the whole company of his followers pretty much freezes. In terror. Not just fear. Or confusion. But terror! Because they think they are seeing a ghost!

"Come on, guys!" says Jesus again. *Pleads* Jesus again. "Check it out. Look here at my hands, my feet – see the holes? Come on, touch me. See? Flesh and blood. I'm no ghost! You can't touch a ghost!"

“Heh, heh.” respond the disciples nervously as they inch forward tentatively to poke at Jesus’ body. “great.” poke. “yeah.” poke. “welcome back, buddy.” Poke.

Jesus had to have rolled his eyes. I mean, what’s it gonna *take* with these fellows?! And then he figures it out – what it’s gonna take, I mean – and he says, “Hey, y’all, got anything to eat around here? Maybe some broiled tilapia?”

And suddenly the air is electric with the same shared thought - "ghosts don't eat!" According to the Jewish tradition, ghosts and angels don't eat.¹ This guy must not be a ghost!

Yeehaw! The disciples finally *get* it! This really *is* Jesus standing before them. Suddenly Luke’s tale morphs into an ‘*after*’ story again. A story about what happens *after* the disciples’ eyes are opened, *after* they recognize Jesus, *after* they grasp the meaning of his death, *after* they get a clue about who he really is. And all it took *this* time was a piece of fish! That, and running through, yet again, as he did on the road to Emmaus, the whole holy story of the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms. Only this time after Jesus opens the disciples’ shuttered, unbelieving minds *first* so he doesn’t have to waste his breath. *This* time Jesus is determined his followers will finally get what he’s been trying to tell them all along: that love is stronger than death; that all creation’s reconciled to God; that everything’s going to be all right; that they don’t have to be afraid anymore.

Oh, did I say so that the disciples could ‘*finally*’ get what Jesus has been saying and modeling all along? Might be a bad choice of words. What I mean is, they get it for a *while*. That is, until they forget. Then they have to hear it again. Then they forget again. Or get scared. Or distracted. Until Jesus makes another stab at penetrating

¹· Lectionary Homiletics, May 2000, p.1 .

their doubting minds and fickle hearts. Back and forth, back and forth, between 'before' and 'after.' 'Before' and 'after' the peace that passes understanding, that is.

Sometimes the disciples recognize Jesus, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they understand who he is, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they grasp the miracle of his resurrection, sometimes they don't. And when they don't, Jesus has to start all over again from scratch. Good news is, he does, again and again and again.

Now the story Adam read this morning from the Act of the Apostles is an example of catching Peter and John in one of those juicy 'after' moments, when they're all freshly filled with the spirit and confident in their faith. But given what we know about the disciples' vacillation, does anybody else find Peter's uppity preaching just a tad hard to take?

You see, Peter and John have just healed a man lame from birth, A man who has been laid every day at the gate of the temple called "Beautiful" to ask for alms. Everybody knows about this man and his affliction, so when Peter and John heal him, of course they're startled and amazed. Which reaction starts Peter pontificating to the crowd about the power and glory of Jesus, whom *you* handed over, he says to his listeners. The Holy and Righteous One whom *you* rejected, says he. The Author of Life whom *you* killed, preaches Peter. I realize you only acted in ignorance, Peter smugly remarks, but really, you'd better repent.

Okay, now I realize this is after Jesus' resurrection and after Jesus has opened Peter's eyes, but, geez, reckon Peter might have been one of those disciples walking on the road to Emmaus with Jesus? Certainly he was among those befuddled by Jesus' absence from the tomb. Never mind among the disciples huddled in the upper room behind locked doors wondering what would become of them after Jesus' death.

And numbered among the terrified the day Jesus appears in the flesh. *And* incidentally, speaking of cocky behavior, who was that again who, just before Jesus' death, betrayed him three times before the cock crowed?

However smug Peter might present right now, basking as he is in the afterglow of his most recent revelation, we know better how it was before, don't we. *And* how it will be again for Peter, for Thomas, for all his early disciples, for all of us later disciples. In fact, all the 'before' and 'after' stories of scripture and our lives reveal that Jesus' disciples of every age have always had with regard to faith our good days and our bad days; our moments of revelation and our moments of total cluelessness; times when we 'get' it, times when we don't. Been that way from the beginning.

In fact, ever since Jesus was born, his disciples have been going back and forth between grasping and losing him, between glimpsing truth and drowning in doubt, between finding faith and choking on fear, between seeking meaning and losing it yet again, sometimes in the same breath. How little it takes in the space of a day, an hour, a moment, an impulse, to throw us back to 'before' the blessing of Jesus' resurrection. How quickly, how easily, how inevitably we forget, or fear, or simply fall away.

Yet Jesus never seems to tire of finding new ways to enter our experience. Jesus seems forever ready to figure out some new way of penetrating our defenses and limitations to reestablish in our hearts God's power over death. No matter what blockheads we disciples are, no matter how clueless, or off base, or even how cocky or annoyingly pious, Jesus doesn't seem to give up reaching for our hearts and teaching and revealing and praying us whole.

Indeed, the diversity of ways Jesus reaches to God's beloved blockheads is stunning, really. Gardening, exercise, prayer – those often work for me. For many, it's

music. Or teaching children. Washing up after a Wednesday night supper, or welcoming a visitor. Writing a check...or a poem. Forging an unexpected peace between enemies. Feeling awe before an ancient sequoia. Regarding divine love reflected in another's eyes.

Jesus can, and does, use whatever's handy. After all, for those earliest disciples, it was a chunk of broiled tilapia. I'd say that through Jesus Christ, God will do *anything* God can, and *everything* we need, to pull us from 'before' to 'after' the revelation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our insight, our understanding, our moment of faith, never lasts for long – we are what we are. At least until that day when we are fully God's.

Meanwhile, whether we recognize him or not, Jesus is always present, reaching, teaching, explaining, revealing, opening our eyes and minds to what he's been trying to tell us all along: that love is stronger than death; that all creation is reconciled to God; that everything's going to be all right; that we don't have to be afraid anymore. Receive now, and whenever you can, the blessing of our Risen Savior who forever stands among us with arms outstretched, saying, "Peace be with you."

To the glory of God. Amen.