

“Their Eyes Were Kept From Recognizing Him” —April 26, 2020

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Luke 24: 13-35

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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?” ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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.” ²⁵Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?” ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

In both our own lives and in the liturgical church year, we are living in the “in between” times. Behind us lies what we used to think of as our normal lives where we could go about freely without having to worry too much about getting sick, especially if we faithfully got our annual flu shot, where we felt somewhat in control of our lives, our schedules, could count on following through with what was on our calendars be it a medical or dental appointments, going to work or school, attending a wedding, a graduation, going to visit the grandkids, taking a vacation. In front of us lies an unknown future. We don’t know what life will look like a month or a year from now here in Calloway County and around the world. All around us are statistics related to illness, death, growing unemployment, the faltering economy, as we learn new terms like PPE and flattening the curve and sheltering in place. It’s confusing and disorienting and scary especially as we sometimes receive conflicting information about testing, and symptoms, and treatments, and when things can safely reopen. We don’t sleep well at night, have strange dreams, and sometimes even wake up thinking that we are still living that strange dream as the realities of the pandemic confront us once again. Anxiety can sometimes almost feel palpable, like it’s menacing and shadowy figure walking beside us whispering into our ears “Be afraid!”

In our scripture passage today from Luke 24:13-35, two disciples of Jesus also find themselves in the in between times, anxious, confused, uncertain about the future, with death and suffering as the backdrop they could not escape. Who were these two disciples? One man is identified as Cleopas. This is the only time he is mentioned in the scriptures. His traveling companion is left unnamed. Many different theories have been put forward who this might be including Symeon, Nathanael, or Nicodemus. Some people have suggested it might be a woman. I remember David Roos telling me he thought it was Cleopas’ wife. While David’s suggestion definitely seems the most likely, for today let’s imagine that the unnamed other is YOU as you make the journey as Cleopas’ companion.

These two disciples are not part of the close inner circle of the original twelve disciples who accompanied Jesus, but they appear to be followers who had carefully watched his ministry unfold, who loved him dearly, and who had staked their hope in him being the Messiah who would save Israel. They had been in Jerusalem for the Passover celebrations where they spent time in the company of Jesus’ disciples and now are walking back to their home in the village of Emmaus, about 7 miles away. It is the Sunday afternoon after the annual Passover festival, a day when many returned to their homes. The road is dusty and full of the noisy traffic of people, animals, and wagons carrying wares. But they likely aren’t paying much attention to what is going on around them externally as they are caught up in internal tumultuous emotions and the waves of grief that can overpower a person when a loved one dies. The feeling that the rug has been pulled out from

under you, that the world as you know it will never be the same again. The sense that you are living in the in between times and don't know what the future holds.

Behind them was the life where they had encountered Jesus of Nazareth and put their trust in him, becoming his disciples. He had provided meaning to their lives and given them new found hope for the future. They had been with the other disciples in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration but now their world had been shaken to its core as they heard two conflicting pieces of information about what had happened to their Master Jesus and how it related to their future. Here, in their own words, is **information one** about what they thought had happened three days previously when they were in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration to *“Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,*

²⁰... our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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.”

As devastating as information one about Jesus was, the following conflicting and confusing **information two** was now added to the mix, which they described as follows:

²²Moreover, 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. ²⁴Some 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.”

So was Jesus dead or was he alive? What were the true facts? Information one or information two? As the two disciples walked toward their home in Emmaus they tried to process this strange information and were likely so caught up in the confusion and emotions of it that they did not really pay much attention when none other than Jesus himself, started walking beside them and eavesdropping in on their conversation. The scriptures say that they merely believed him to be a *“stranger”* and that *“their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”*

I would like us to stop and think about this phrase: *“their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”* They were blindsided. Not only did their own inward preoccupation and confusion prevent them from seeing that it was Jesus himself but the scripture also suggests that something else prevented them from seeing clearly who he was and recognizing him. We bring so many of our own filters to life that keep us from seeing clearly who another person is, from recognizing what the truth is, don't we? We believe others' opinions about people without taking the time to truly get to know

them. I don't think we realize the extent to which we are the victims of extreme intentional propagandizing. We simply accept most of the information we get through our favorite cable news channel as the truth. We can get so overly attached to a certain belief system, political party, doctrine that we can't see life from any other perspective than through that particular filter. We get stuck in our stories about ourselves, others, and the way the world operates. Added to this is our own internal landscape comprised of our unexamined prejudices, anger, envy, shame, and fear and so much else of which we are either unaware or have suppressed that block accurate vision. We no longer can see ourselves, others, and our world clearly. We no longer can even recognize who Jesus is as we try to fashion him into our own image. There are so many layers that need to be discarded and so many internal impediments and outside forces that obscure our vision as we see through a glass darkly or not at all.

¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him” our scripture says.

This stranger asks them, *“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”* Furthermore, why do you look so sad? So they turned to him unaware that he is their Beloved master Jesus, astonished that this stranger had not heard about what had happened in Jerusalem. They told him that Jesus, the one they believed would redeem Israel, had been unjustly condemned to death and crucified three days earlier but that just this morning some of the women in their group had said that they had found his tomb empty and angels had told them he was alive!

It's difficult to know how they thought this stranger might react to this startling piece of information. I'm wondering, however, if they were at all taken aback by the rather harsh and abrupt way that this stranger responded to them? He told them they were foolish and slow of heart to believe. This sounds kind of condescending, doesn't it? Did they not see that all that happened was the fulfillment of prophecy and scripture as he walked them through scripture and verse to explain to them in a way that appealed to their rational minds that everything that happened to Jesus, the Messiah, was foreordained. It was part of God's very plan that he needed to suffer in order to enter into his glory.

The two disciples listened to this stranger explicate scripture for them as they walked for a few hours along the seven-mile road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. When they arrived at the place in the road that branched off to lead them to their village, the stranger left them behind and began walking on. But they called him back, saying *“Stay with us because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over”* (vs. 29).

I believe that two things informed their invitation. The first probably had to do with them wanting to continue the conversation with him. Later on in the scripture they describe their ‘hearts burning within them’ while he ‘opened up scripture to them.’ They obviously were intrigued by his new way of looking at their Hebrew scriptures. However, even though compelling, they still did not recognize him as Jesus. The rational analysis of their minds could not open up their eyes to see what was before them.

Second, and perhaps even more importantly, their invitation to come home with them had everything to do with the practice of Middle Eastern hospitality. In ancient times, traveling could be dangerous, there were very few inns, and strangers depended on people offering up their homes to them for lodging and meals. Therefore, offering hospitality was commanded in the Old Testament Hebrew scriptures. Leviticus 19:33-34 states that: ³³ *‘When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. ³⁴ The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.’* (NASB). In the New Testament, the Greek word translated as ‘hospitality’ means ‘love of strangers.’ And in the book of Hebrews (13:2) the early Christian community was reminded: *“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”*

Remember that the two disciples as they walked the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus understood the person to have been walking beside them and interpreting scripture to have been a “stranger.” So they opened up their home to him and he, in keeping with the Biblical mandate of hospitality, graciously received their hospitality and went home with them. As their guest perhaps rested, they busied themselves with preparing a meal. When the table was set with food they sat down together. The scriptures say that this stranger *“took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them.”* And with this the scriptures say that *“their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”* At the moment that their eyes were opened and they recognized him during the breaking of the bread, he disappeared from their sight! We do not know if he simply left the room and went on his way or if he somehow magically vanished, poof, into thin air! What we do know is that they were fully convinced that they had encountered the risen Lord! From that moment on their lives were transformed. And with great joy and astonishment in their voices they said to one another *“Were not our hearts burning within us, while he talked to us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”*

They had seen Jesus, their hearts “burned within” them, they had been strangely touched while he discussed Scriptures with them. But then they had seen Jesus “as through a glass darkly,” (I Cor. 13:12, KJV) as their eyes were kept from recognizing him. It was only when sharing that ordinary

meal with one they received as a stranger, that their eyes were opened and they were enabled to see him “face to face”!

The scriptures say that: ³³*That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.* All week as I have lived with this scripture, I have found myself wondering about what those two disciples talked about as they traveled those seven miles back to Jerusalem.

Did they perhaps recall the story recounted in Genesis 18:1-15 they had been told as children about their ancestors Abraham and Sarah, who practiced hospitality to strangers by the oaks of Mamre only to discover that they had provided a meal to the Lord and two angels?

Did they reminisce about the time that a crowd of some 5,000 people gathered around Jesus, hungry both for his message and food for their stomachs, when Jesus took two fish and five loaves as *“he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled.”* (Luke 9:15-17)

And wow, do you remember how just last week in the Upper Room in Jerusalem some of Jesus’ closest disciples told us the story, as recounted in Luke’s Gospel (22:14-19), that ¹⁴*When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him.* ¹⁵*He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”* ¹⁷*Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”* ¹⁹*Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”*

Their eyes were only opened and they could only see face to face when they had welcomed a stranger to their table in their home in Emmaus, who then took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Only then were the blinders removed from their eyes as they were enabled to recognize the stranger as their Lord! After they had rushed back to Jerusalem, they told the other disciples that Information Number Two that they had heard from the women wasn’t an idle tale after all but was true, as they excitedly shared: *“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.*

This scripture calls upon us to remember once again not only the commandment to offer hospitality to all the strangers in this world who need our help in various ways, but also to remember who

Jesus is today. For are we not the actual body of Christ in this world? Are we not the hands, the feet, the heart called to reach out to a hurting world by feeding, clothing, visiting, caring, encouraging?

As St. Teresa of Avila reminds us in her often repeated saying:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*

This is entirely scriptural! For in the final judgment of nations in Matthew 25:34-35, Jesus tells us that he himself appears every time we feed someone who was hungry, gave drink to someone who is thirsty, visit someone in prison, welcome anyone who is a stranger.

All of us are on a life-long journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus as we walk through darkness and confusion to the light and clarity as our eyes are opened and we recognize Jesus as the risen Lord. How do we find our risen Lord? We find Jesus as we study the Word in our Holy Scriptures. We find Jesus through prayer. We find Jesus through His Spirit, the Holy Spirit. And, in this story, we discover that we find Jesus as we welcome a stranger into the homes of our hearts and our lives as we do something as simple as share a meal together.

As sixteen of us from our church experienced during the summer of 2017 in Fort Worth when, after an intensive week of encounters and experiences connecting with people in various locations who were impoverished, we gave over our mattresses and prepared a meal for twelve homeless men, strangers to us, who would be spending the night at the church we were staying at.

We worked hard to prepare a meal that would be a special treat for them: hamburgers on the grill, fresh tomatoes from the garden, watermelon, corn on the cob, Ann's ratatouille, brownies and ice cream. And after cooking and the youth playing card games with them, we all sat together around a table, all twelve of them, all sixteen of us, and some folks from the host church, and shared a common meal over laughter and stories as the walls fell down, the veil was lifted, and we discovered our shared humanity and the many ways we connected. This was a Spirit-filled moment as we greeted the Holy Spirit in each other, realizing that we truly were the body of Christ on earth. And not just those of us who were doing the giving, but also those who were receiving, realizing

that we who thought we were the givers truly were the receivers as we encountered the risen Christ in each other!

And later that evening when the homeless men, who no longer were strangers to us but all had names and interesting stories, were sleeping soundly on comfortable mattresses with clean sheets, having showered and dried off with towels fresh out of the drier, wearing clean clothes that the church had provided, stomachs full with the delicious meal we had shared together, and our own group had dispersed to get ready for bed, or to play games in the common room, or to spend some time on their phones, I was left alone to reflect and pray.

And as I opened the doors leading into the dimly lit, quiet sanctuary, I looked to the front and saw Roman, then a high school senior, sitting on the front pew with the church's custodian, who himself had once been homeless. With a Bible open, the custodian was showing and opening the scriptures to Roman, explaining their meaning to him. My heart was filled with joy as I quietly closed the door and went on my way.

³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?"

Let us pray: Lord, we pray that you would open up the eyes of our hearts so that we might see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly all the days of our lives. Amen.