

Recognizing Jesus  
Luke 24:13-35  
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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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Between the four gospels there are many stories of people encountering Jesus after the resurrection. There are stories of encounters with the women near the tomb. There are stories of Jesus finding his way into locked rooms so the disciples can see him. There are stories that end with Jesus commissioning the disciples so that his ministry can continue even in his absence. There are stories of fishing and breakfast on the beach.

And during this Easter season, we are looking at these stories.

But I dare say that if we polled people, it might be today's story that would rank as the favorite. After all there is something that draws us in to this "road to Emmaus" experience.

What do you think that is?

Maybe part of the appeal is that while in this story Jesus does appear to those who already knew him, those who were already followers, this isn't a story about the inner circle. All of the other stories talk about his appearances to the twelve and to the women - the people we expect. But this story is different because here Jesus appears to two people - one who remains unnamed - that we haven't heard of before. He appears to people who knew him, who followed him, but who weren't up front in every picture with him. He appears to people who might just be a little more like us.

Maybe that makes this story more accessible.

Or maybe it's the hospitality that appeals to us. Maybe, even though we know it is an expected part of middle eastern culture, we are drawn in by people who invite a stranger to come into their home, to sit at their table, to stay under their roof. Maybe that draws us in because we struggle with such things even as we want to be those generous, hospitable people.

Maybe it's the invitation to come and stay, to share a meal, that draws us in.

Or maybe it's the palpable experience that gets us. After all, if we listen closely to this story and let ourselves enter the scene, we can feel the grit on our feet from a conversation during a long, dusty walk home...we can smell dinner on the stove, bread baking...we can feel our bodies relax as we ease ourselves down to sit at the table...and if we are paying enough attention, we can likely feel our own hearts burning within us when these disciples make that same declaration.

Fear and confusion and excitement mixed together...a long walk being good for the soul in a difficult time...rest and food at the end of the day...the site and sound of Jesus being nearby...a realization that enlivens Jesus' followers...maybe these are what make us love this story.

Whatever it is, there is something that draws us in.

And that is a good place to be because this story offers something more than just an assurance of resurrection. It offers the possibility - even now - of our encountering Jesus, too.

Here were two of his followers. They had been with the disciples. They knew the horrors that had happened to Jesus. They had heard the women's declarations about the empty tomb. Finally, knowing that nighttime travel was dangerous, they tore themselves away and headed to Emmaus.

They might have been spouses, neighbors, friends, business partners, people from the same area who had met while following Jesus. We don't know for sure. They may have been from Emmaus or maybe they lived further away and had simply arranged to stay there for the night. Again, we don't know for sure.

What we do know is they had to be physically and emotionally exhausted as they walked along, as they talked to a stranger, and even as they practiced hospitality at their journey's end.

And we are told, not only that they didn't recognize Jesus, but that they were kept from it. Depending on the version of the Bible you are reading, verse 16 says everything from "they were prevented" (*CEB*) to "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (*NRSV*) to "they were not able to recognize who he was" (*The Message*). And while many scholars I have read say there is not a significant difference between the Greek used here and used in other places where people did not recognize Jesus after his resurrection, still the English translations cause us to pause for a moment.

There may not be a significant difference that tells us we need to hear that they were supernaturally kept from knowing him. But this story reminds us that all sorts of things can keep us from seeing what is right in front of us. All sorts of things can keep us from experiencing God.

I wonder if that isn't part of what appeals to us about this story. Maybe one of the gifts for us is the reassurance that even if we miss noticing Jesus one day...he'll show up again another. Maybe one of the gifts for us in this story is that it reminds us that the divine is not easily swayed and shooed away, but is faithful and tenacious in the desire to know us and be known by us.

Some read this story and do assume that God kept them from recognizing Jesus until an opportune moment. Some read this story and assume that the resurrected Jesus just looked

different and that it took a familiar act before they could see it was him. Some read this story and assume that it was exhaustion or fear or grief, even hope or a glimmer of joy - just that the whole experience of that weekend had been so consuming that they couldn't see what they didn't expect. And the reality is that we'll never know exactly what it was.

But what we do know is that sometimes *we* miss those moments. Sometimes we are fortunate enough to get to look back later and declare that God was with us all the time. Sometimes we probably really miss them, and simply go on and trust that God will keep showing up.

And, friends, as we hear this story again in this time when our emotions are off kilter and our experiences aren't what we expect, we are assured that Jesus continues to walk beside us, that God keeps showing up, that the winds of the Spirit are moving around and within us.

And, relax...sometimes we will miss it. We won't know how to name that presence. But, again and again, just like in those early days after the resurrection...Jesus keeps walking with us, keeps talking with us, keeps breaking bread with us, keeps showing up.

Some days we won't recognize him. But on other days, our hearts will burn within us - whether in the breaking of bread, in the sharing of hospitality, in the joy of deep love, or even in comfort offered during a time of struggle - and when that happens, we will pause and recognize that Jesus has been with us all the time.

Amen.