

4-19-26 sermon

Luke 24.13-35

“While they were talking and discussing, Jesus *himself* came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Well, I’ve certainly had us hopping around the Gospels this Eastertide! On Easter Sunday, we heard the end of *Mark’s* Gospel, when a young man dressed in white tells the women who have come to the tomb that Jesus has been raised – he is not here! “Go and tell the disciples,” he says, “but they fled from the tomb and said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Last Sunday, we heard the conclusion of *John’s* Gospel. This time it’s only Mary Magdalene who goes to the tomb. She meets the risen Jesus himself, who tells her to go to the disciples and tell them that he is ascending to the Father. And she *does* go, and tells the disciples what Jesus told her to. But when Jesus himself shows up, Thomas isn’t there, and when the others tell him *they* have seen Jesus, he refuses to accept their story “unless I can put my hand in Jesus’ side.” This week we’re at the conclusion of *Luke’s* Gospel, who tells us that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women encounter two dazzling figures at the tomb, who ask them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember that he told you; all of this was going to happen?” Then they remembered his words, and they went back to the disciples and told them. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

For people who insist on taking the bible literally – that everything we find there is factually accurate, literally true, actually happened – the very different conclusions to the Gospels pose a real problem.

Who went to the tomb?

Who did they meet there?

What did they do afterwards?

You have to tangle yourself in all kinds of knots to make these accounts cohere. But if we take the bible *seriously*, rather than *literally*, then we can recognize that each of the Gospel writers arrange the story they’re telling in different ways to fit their different audiences. And so, for Luke, whose audience is primarily gentiles – people who *don’t* know the story of Israel and who therefore have a much more difficult task to comprehend why this Jewish figure ‘the Messiah’ should have any relevance to *them* – the theme of ‘sight,’ of *comprehension* is central to the way Luke tells the story. So, it should not surprise us to find him writing these words, “...but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Because ‘Who can see who Jesus is?’ is the central question Luke asks.

The trouble for Jesus’ disciples, including, apparently, these two on the way to Emmaus, is that they were so locked into a particular way of understanding who Messiah is and what Messiah ought to do, that they could not see who their rabbi was.

So, when, back in chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands," Luke tells us, "but they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it." Then, in chapter 18, right before they arrive in Jerusalem for that final week, Jesus takes the twelve aside and tells them, "Everything written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the gentiles; he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again. But," Luke continues, "the disciples understood *nothing* about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said." Then, immediately after this, we reach the height of Luke's use of irony, because the first person in Luke's Gospel to identify this wandering rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, as the Messiah – other than the demons – by calling out to him, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" is a *blind* man. And the response of the disciples? They ordered the blind man to be quiet! And so, no, it really shouldn't surprise us to hear Luke say about these two disciples on their way home to Emmaus,

"While they were talking and discussing, Jesus *himself* came near and went with them, *but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*"

"Get this, reader," Luke says, "even though Jesus *himself* – not a young man, not a couple of mysterious dazzling creatures – no, Jesus *himself* is walking with these two people, people who've been walking with him for three years, and they still can't see him!" Jesus starts a conversation with them. "So, uh, what do you talking about while you walk along?" They stop, looking sad. One of them says, "Where have *you* been for the last week? Are you the only *stranger* in town who doesn't know the things that have happened?"

"What things?"

"The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. How our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him! We had hoped that he was the Messiah, the one to redeem Israel. Oh, and get this! It's now the third day since all that happened. Some of the women in our group were at the tomb this morning, but didn't find his body! They came back and talked about "a vision of angels" who said he was alive, if you can believe that! Some of those who were there with us went and checked it out for themselves and, sure enough, the tomb *was* empty, but there was no sign of Jesus."

Now, I think if I'd been Jesus, all manner of snarky responses might have come to mind at that point. Perhaps even simply pointing to my face with a questioning look! But I'm not Jesus. He simply responded with words they've heard not that long ago. Then he begins to open up the scriptures to them, beginning with Torah – the books of Moses – and the prophets. He tells them their story once more and how it all points to the man walking alongside them, as they walk away from it all.

It's easy to smile, and nod our heads knowingly, when Jesus says to them, "Oh, you foolish people. Slow to believe all the prophets say because it doesn't line up with what you think God ought to do. What you think Messiah ought to be."

"You tell 'em Jesus! How could they be so blind? I would have recognized you as soon as I saw you. Or at least, as soon as I heard your voice. I mean, come on. How many times had they heard all this before? I mean. Seriously." But whenever I'm tempted to start to think those kinds of thoughts about other people, there's this small voice that whispers back, "Seriously? Like you would totally have believed those women? *You* wouldn't have considered their words 'an idle tale'?"

Interesting, Sean.

Remember Friday night? When you were sitting on your back porch with Rebecca's family, and as the night sky turned purple, then deepened into black and those stars started twinkling. Those planets blazed steadily. The 'Big Dipper,' Dale pointed out even before it was barely visible. Those heavenly lights that inspired one of my favorite songs, you know the one:

"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them;
mortals, that you care for them?"

Did you marvel in their beauty? Maybe even think of the Eighth Psalm? Or did you point up and say, "I think that's a satellite up there." Then proceed to have a lengthy discussion about which were planes or satellites. All that beauty, and you were focused on the accomplishments of humans. Instead of being awed like the psalmist, and concluding, "what are mortals, that you care for us!" you were deciding what kind of speed indicated a satellite.

"That other poet I like, Ralph Waldo Emerson, what did he say?"

"If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years,
how men would believe and adore;
and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God
which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty,
and light the universe with their admonishing smile."

And you were thinking about Elon Musk, and Starlink. Hmm. Interesting."

How could those disciples miss Jesus, when he was right there? I might know a thing or two about missing the presence of the divine myself.

Perhaps you do too.

It's so easy to get caught up in all the activities of life that we fail to see Jesus when he shows up right in front of us, in the person right in front of us. One made in the image of God. If we only expect to hear God speak at certain times in certain places, then we'll miss the

promptings of the Spirit that can come at any given time. If we have created God in our own image, or, perhaps, with the images that we have been handed by people to whom we have given authority, then we might believe God is present in prayer breakfasts where the powerful misquote scripture to justify their warmongering, rather than God being present in the children whose school breakfast funding has been cut.

So perhaps I shouldn't be too critical of those two disciples who failed to see Jesus. Because I think I do too. More often than I care to admit. I'm so easily distracted by so many things, and find it difficult to set intentions, to be more mindful throughout the day. I can be so focused on my 'to do' list that I miss what God is actually inviting me to do. To conclude that when things do *not* go as planned or expected, that that is a failure rather than an invitation to reconsider what I'm doing. And all of that is why it *is* so important for me to gather with you all regularly. Not because I'm the pastor-elect and I kind of have to be here every Sunday. But in order for me – for us – to be reminded of our story. To be reminded of the truth of the God revealed in scripture. Especially when there's so much God-talk being used to justify ungodly acts. To be reminded that I *am*, indeed, a sinner. One in need of forgiveness and reconciliation.

But also, we gather to encounter God together. Yes, I realize that we can encounter God anywhere and everywhere. As one person put it, "I'd rather be in the mountains thinking about God, than in church, thinking about the mountains." I've felt that myself on occasion. But, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews exhorted, "Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have the habit of doing. Rather, let us encourage one another." Because we all walk through those doors in different states of mind and emotion. Some of us need encouragement for all manner of reasons. Some of us are really struggling, for all manner of reasons, and we need to experience the presence of God. But not as an idea, as a feeling, but as flesh, embodied. To be wrapped in the arms of God – not as a metaphor, but in a hug. And then, on the first and third Sundays of the month, we're invited to experience God's presence together in a very particular way. One which those two disciples proclaimed at the end of today's Gospel reading: "He has been made known to us in the breaking of bread."

When we come to the Table of the Lord, we're invited to be fully present to ourselves and to God. To be reminded in the liturgy – yet again – of our story. And to be reminded that we can encounter the presence of the divine at *every* meal. Whenever we break bread, with whomever we break it. To be a little in awe of the gift that is seated across the table from us. A person made in the image of God. Even as they say, 'pass the salt please.' *And*, perhaps, to be a little more Ralph Waldo Emerson, and a little less Elon Musk. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, may he be made known to *us* in the breaking of bread.

Amen, and amen.