

“RECOGNIZING JESUS”

Luke 24:13-35

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Sometimes we're with Jesus and don't know it. Sometimes we know it only as he seems to disappear. The resurrection stories, particularly in Luke and John, have this very mysterious feel to them. They're adamant that Jesus is really, truly alive in the flesh while giving him powers that don't normally belong to physical objects.

Two disciples encounter Jesus on their way to Emmaus. Something keeps them from recognizing him, but nothing indicates that he is anything but a normal human being. He appears as a stranger, but they receive him well, even trusting that he will not expose them to the authorities as followers of Jesus, so recently put to death. They feel inspired as Jesus talks with them, but people do that for us too without rising from the dead. They persuade Jesus to stop with them and share a meal and he does this. Still a very human, normal encounter (if you didn't know that this was the crucified Lord).

But when he breaks the bread and they finally understand who this is with them, he disappears. People don't vanish before our eyes, at least not without some sort of illusionist's trick. In John's gospel he will walk through locked doors and according to Luke, a few weeks later he will disappear into the sky, riding the clouds. Just when we're ready to grab hold, he's gone.

Last week, Janet talked about the resurrection account in Mark, where there is only an announcement, but no appearance, where the announcement doesn't even produce joy. It sends women away in fear. Preachers struggle with that story because there's no celebration. All the hope of Easter has to be imagined. It's so much easier to preach hope when Jesus is present. We have to struggle through Mark's version.

So I'm glad to have left that problem with Janet, but as I looked over this story, I've discovered a very similar problem of my own. Every time Jesus appears, he also disappears... and the last word is the disappearance. In the end, Jesus is gone. We see this pattern summarized in verse 31. After Jesus breaks the bread, Luke tells us: "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight."

Most of you know that I love this response we use at Easter: "Christ is risen! *Christ is risen indeed!!*" We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We like to linger over this good news that Jesus is alive! But the stories of his appearance have this dissonant note: in the end, he's gone. Now why is that?

To answer that question, we need to acknowledge a basic truth about the gospels (and the rest of the Bible for that matter). The gospels are not written for Jesus just as the Bible is not written for God. They are written for his followers. And they are not written so that

we can know about the things that happened to Jesus. The gospels do not intend to relate the facts about Jesus... except as those facts impact us. The resurrection stories are as much about us as about Jesus. They are invitations to a new way for us to live our lives.

Prior to his crucifixion, all the gospels present a Jesus who is demonstrating to his followers what the reign of God looks like. He's been showing them that God is present in the world. The blind see, the lame walk, the hungry are fed. These are the things that happen in God's world. These are the things that happen when Jesus is around.

The gospels are written not only to show us this, but to encourage his followers to be about the same things. Jesus may be gone, but God is still here, living through us.

The resurrection "disappearances" are a kind of final exam. Jesus is walking with these two disciples and their hearts are burning within them as he opens up the scriptures for them. They are alive even though they have no idea that Jesus is with them. They are seeing in the stranger one who is able to touch their souls.

And when the stranger becomes the host at table and breaks bread, they are seeing Jesus come alive for them. And the first thing they do is to return immediately to the community of faith, to the living faith community, no longer caught up in despair, but renewed with hope. And if you read on, you'll see that Jesus turns up there as well, and he invites them to witness the possibility for new life in his own body that was dead just three days ago. But again he goes away.

So here's the final exam question: "Where do you recognize Jesus after his body has disappeared?" This is about your life, about your faith. Discipleship is fundamentally about learning to recognize Jesus.

The Emmaus story suggests two places we ought to pay close attention to: when we break bread together and when we read scripture together; the church potluck and church school. The decline of these two ministries in the church should give us pause. We know that food and reflection help us recognize Jesus in our world. These two elements are part of what makes the celebration of a person's life in a memorial service so rich. We do this really well here. But we experience God's presence around food following the service as well, and yet too few people are maintaining that ministry. And if you're relying only on the sermon for your connection to the scriptures, well, good as they are, you could be doing more.

Van Dyke wrote a book called *The Other Wise Man*. It's a story about the wise man who got left behind and arrived too late to see Jesus at the manger. He doesn't catch up with Jesus until the crucifixion because he's delayed by several people in need of help. It's only as he sees the crucified Jesus that he realizes that he's been seeing Jesus all along in the faces of those he helped.

Now it's easy to recognize Jesus here, but when we leave, he's harder to find. Discipleship happens as we learn to recognize Jesus in people we see. The gospels help

us with this. Doesn't the calming of the sea remind us to look for Jesus when turmoil surrounds us? His parables remind us to look for him among the least: those who hunger and thirst, who are in prison, who lack adequate clothing and housing. Does the fact that the gospels present Jesus as a poor man, as homeless, as numbered among the oppressed suggest place we might look to recognize Jesus?

The disappearances aren't intended to discourage us. In fact when Jesus is finally gone, the faith community becomes more alive than ever. The resurrection is our life, not just Jesus'. And these appearances encourage us to see the life of faith as a life in search of the face of Christ. He is alive, but you can't touch his body. You can't hear his voice. He's gone... but not gone, gone. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, he remains to be recognized, to be known again and again as we hear his words and imitate his deeds and see through his eyes those crying out for God's help.

Amen.