

Recognizing Jesus

The Third Sunday of Easter: April 26, 2020

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

A 50-year-old woman was rushed to the hospital, and during an emergency surgery she had a near death experience. At the end of the tunnel of light, she saw God face to face and said, "Well, I guess this means my time is up." "Not at all," God said. "In fact, you have another 39 years, 11 days and six hours."

Knowing that she had so many more years, she stayed in the hospital a few more days, moving to the elective surgery wing for what is sometimes now called an 'extreme makeover': facelift, tummy tuck, hair makeover - the works. But leaving the hospital, she crossed a busy street, was hit by an ambulance, and killed instantly.

"Hey, God," she demanded, "What happened to 39 more years?" God said, "Well, I'm sorry; I'm afraid I didn't recognize you!"

You may or may not see any merit in that story. But I should point out to you that it's actually never true that God does not or could not recognize any one of us. One theme throughout the Bible, including in the teachings of Jesus, is that God knows us each by name; God knows every hair on our heads - whether natural or dyed, wavy straight or thinning - and there's nowhere we can stray or hide out from God. At every moment, in every place, God is able to find us and recognize us and invite us into the mystery of loving relationship.

Where God and humans are concerned, the trouble with recognition is always on the human side. And this problem with recognition strikingly shows itself in the resurrection appearances of Jesus. We see it, for instance, in the followers of Jesus about whom we hear in today's story from Luke. (24:13-35) It's a story that ends with a beautiful and meaningful moment of recognition: We're told that after sharing a long walk and talk with them, *[Jesus] was at the table with them, [and] he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him ...*" (Luke 24:30-31a)

Some commentators observe that this recognition moment is not only great storytelling, it's also intended by Luke as a teaching moment for all who follow Jesus, including you and me. It's about our commitment to gather together, even if only virtually, to share in fellowship and teaching and the breaking of bread. It's about the divine hunger within us that we seek to satisfy in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. It's about our prayers to recognize God, now alive in Christ, to be answered through sharing the life of faith ~ and questioning ~ together.

We may naturally wonder why these disciples were unable at first to see Jesus. The text itself gives a variety of cues, some of them contradictory, but all of them plausible and all of them possibly relevant to our own lives and faith. The text says that 'their eyes were kept from recognizing them.' So maybe there was some divine concealment at work. And then Jesus accuses them of being 'foolish and slow of heart to believe.' We've been those followers as well, haven't we?

And we may also note the possible impact of their grief, as they tell Jesus, not yet recognized, the story of his own tragic betrayal and death; and "*.. we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*" (24:21) "We had hoped." Such poignant words. What had you or I been hoping for that had been crushed beyond apparent hope?

With regard to this moment in the story, an author named Richard Swanson writes: "*Don't pretend to talk about resurrection unless you are willing to acknowledge the depths of deadly disappointment that make it necessary.*"

An excellent youth pastor I once worked with always began her meetings with kids by saying, "Tell me about God sightings in your life this week."

She was asking them to become more aware of the zones in their hearts where seeing Jesus may take place.

She was inviting them to see Jesus in both the miraculous and the mundane, the ordinary, the routine.

She was asking them to make a habit of looking for the presence of Christ in others.

She was acknowledging that seeing God in Christ is a discipline and a tricky business and sometimes a matter of divine timing and sometimes we need one another to see what we, on our own, have failed to see or can't see.

What would it be like if you and I had a daily Easter discipline of asking, at the end of each day, "*Where was the God sighting in my life today?*" In answering, we might discover a sense of kindredness with other seekers and followers, including the members of a certain youth group, and those with whom we share fellowship in the life of our own church, including some we have on occasion known to be God-seers, and those who traveled that Emmaus road so long ago. They began the day gutted of hope. But by the end of it they saw the resurrected One, Jesus, and their hearts were filled with great joy. *Amen.*