

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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## THE MAN NOBODY KNOWS

Luke 24: 13-35

In 1925 an advertising executive named Bruce Barton published a book that would become a national bestseller. It was entitled **The Man Nobody Knows**. It is a decidedly Twentieth Century re-casting of the man from Nazareth. This book illustrates wonderfully what Albert Schweitzer observed some twenty years earlier. In his class work **The Quest of the Historical Jesus** Schwetzer insisted that most biographies of Jesus tell us more about the biographer than they do about Jesus.

Indeed, this book tells us a lot about Bruce Barton. About Jesus, not so much. Son of a Congregational pastor, Barton became an advertising executive in what was then a very young industry. In fact, Barton became one of advertising's prominent pioneers. Barton came up with the concept of Betty Crocker, the iconic woman baker. He also proposed the name for that new automobile consortium-General Motors. On a roll, he dreamed up the name for a new electronics firm-General Electric. Evidently, he liked the word "General". I wonder if he came up with the name for General Mills?

Barton even gave the Salvation Army its motto: “A man may be down, but he is not out.”

So during the Roaring Twenties this successful ad man wrote a biography about Jesus. Not surprisingly, Barton made Jesus into a successful businessman. Sure enough, Jesus uses the successful business model of “surrounding himself with people in whom he saw great potential.” He told brief, engaging stories that captured people’s imagination. For Barton, all the parables are really advertisements for the Kingdom of God, the parable of the Good Samaritan being the best ad of all time.

Barton suggested that there were four traits of Jesus that were simply captivating. First, Jesus had the power to create health in others. Second, his strong personality was hugely appealing to women, since, according to Barton, “weakness does not appeal to women.” Third, he loved being outdoors. Fourth, Jesus had steel-like nerves and courage.

Now as I consider these four attributes, I must admit two of them have never once occurred to me. Is this really why Jesus appealed to women? Because he did not exhibit weakness? And the fact that Jesus was an outdoors kind of guy? Never crossed my mind.

At the beginning of his book Barton describes the Jesus he learned about in Sunday School. Jesus seemed to pale into a weakling when compared to Daniel fending off attack in the lion's den and David launching a smooth stone into Goliath's forehead. For young Barton, Jesus had "no muscles and a sad expression." This Jesus was, in his mind, "sissified", all too "meek and lowly."

So the adult Barton gave us a hard driving Jesus who turns out to be the best businessman of all times. "The Man Nobody Knows" is the greatest advertiser ever for the Kingdom of God. In short, a manly Jesus for the Roaring Twenties. So that's the man Barton wants us to know all about. In all honesty, that's a Jesus I hardly recognize.

During the many years I taught Jesus and the Gospels at UNM, I asked my students to write a one-page paper the first night of the course. I asked them to describe to Martians who have landed on our planet just who this Jesus is. So how would you describe Jesus in a one-page summary? I took up their papers and then gave them back on the last night of the course. Interesting what a semester of study will do for your understanding of Jesus.

In many respects Jesus is still the "man nobody knows." Why? Because we all see Jesus with our own eyes, through our own

prejudices. Whatever we know of Jesus will always be through a “glass darkly”, filtered through lenses that are never completely free of our preconceptions. Like Bruce Barton, who wanted a more “manly” Jesus for the Roaring Twenties.

And so it was for Cleopas and his friend walking back from Jerusalem, a seven-mile hike to their hometown. They are talking about what happened to Jesus and they are depressed. It is possible that Cleopas’ wife Mary witnessed Jesus’ death, at least according to the Gospel of John (19:25) These disciples had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. So it was a long, sad walk home.

Then the Risen One who nobody knows approaches Cleopas and his friend. The Risen One is incognito, hidden in plain sight. In truth, their eyes were kept from recognizing him. The One nobody knows acts like he knows nothing. He questions these two friends about what they were talking about. They cannot believe that this stranger knows nothing of what happened to Jesus. Perhaps there is a hint of humor here, as these two walking partners explain to the Risen One what happened to the Crucified One! Then they explain that some of the women disciples claimed that they had a vision of angels saying Jesus was live.

At that point this complete unknown can take it no more. He scolds Cleopas and his friend for their unbelief. And then he gives them a Bible lesson ranging from Moses through the prophets. The subject? How it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and then enter into his glory.

Perhaps this stranger outlined the overarching plan of God to guide suffering slaves into freedom and forlorn exiles back home. God has always brought Israel out of suffering into new life. And so too the Messiah-from suffering to triumph. When these two disciples heard this story, their hearts burned within them as this one unknown opened to them the key to understanding Scripture.

When they arrive in Emmaus, they urge this insightful stranger to join them for dinner. During the meal, this one nobody knew broke the bread and blessed it and gave it to them. In that sacred moment, their eyes were opened and they finally recognized him. This complete unknown was revealed as the One they loved and cherished. And just that quickly he was gone, vanished from their sight. How astonished they must have been!

And then Cleopas and his friend take off for Jerusalem as fast as they can. By the way, have you noticed all the running that takes place in these resurrection narratives? This is astonishing news that

sends you off at a full gallop. And then these two arrive breathlessly in the City of David only to hear that Peter had seen the Risen Lord. And finally they get to tell their story. And this is the punch line, “The One we did not recognize was made known to us in the breaking of bread.”

The breaking of the bread, the sharing of the cup, is the moment when our eyes can be opened as well. And yet there is a mystery about this “man nobody knows.” Perhaps Jesus will always remain to some extent an elusive presence in our lives. How is it that Jesus is present when two or three are gathered in his name? How is it that Jesus “knows our every sorrow”, as the old hymn says? How is that Jesus intercedes for all the saints before the throne of God? It is a deep, deep mystery, like that complete unknown on the road to Emmaus.

Albert Schweitzer concluded his book on **The Quest for the Historical Jesus** by describing this unknown carpenter from Nazareth encountering simple fishermen by the Sea of Galilee. This is Schweitzer’s depiction: “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same words: ‘Follow me!’ And sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He

commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they will pass through in his fellowship. And as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is.”

And in all our own experiences, whether on the road or at the table or in our most difficult moments, he comes to us still. The One who wishes to be known and loved and adored and served. The One who would redeem the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.