

The Familiar Stranger

Luke 24:13-35

April 6, 2008

I.

Today's reading continues the Easter story. For the third time in three weeks we heard about an appearance of Jesus after his resurrection.

And before we even get into the details of the Gospel, I want to emphasize that the resurrection of our Lord and Savior is at the core of our faith. No other religion embraces such an idea. Abraham and Moses died as humans. Muhammad and Buddha were truly mortal. Confucius and Gandhi went to the grave just like other people. Every New Age leader will succumb to old age.

Christ was different. He had a human appearance because of his human mother, but he also had a fully divine nature because God, through Holy Spirit, was his Father. And even though he died in his humanity, he was resurrected in his divinity. This distinguishes Christianity from everything else. It's why we believe there is more to life than what we see around us. When we ask about the meaning of life, we look to Christ's resurrection for a large part of the answer.

But back to the story. The first two appearances of Jesus produced some uncertainty. In the Easter reading in John's Gospel, Jesus appeared to Mary at the empty tomb and she did not recognize him at first. She thought he was the gardener until he spoke to her. Last week we heard how Thomas refused to believe that Jesus had risen merely because others said so.

Today's story is similar because the two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not immediately recognize Jesus either. And as the story unfolds we can see how it helps us understand our faith.

II.

It all began when two disciples left Jerusalem in grief and sadness, and it ended a few hours later when they returned to Jerusalem in joy and exultation. What happened in between?

In the opening scene two people were walking along a road, going home dejected, disillusioned, and disappointed. The Messiah they hoped would liberate them from Roman rule was dead. And all of the things that Jesus had taught about forgiveness, love, and a different way of living just didn't make sense any more. It was all over. Finished. The End.

But then an interesting thing happened. Another person joined them. We all know it was the resurrected Jesus, but they were divinely prevented from recognizing him. Jesus was not wearing a disguise. It was broad daylight. The sun was not in their eyes. But yet, for reasons I will soon mention, it was not yet time for them to realize who he was.

Imagine you were watching this scene in a movie. Everyone in the audience would know what's happening but the two people on the screen would be oblivious. The suspense would start to build, wouldn't it?

And then the plot thickened. Jesus, seemingly unaware of their sorrow, asked what they were talking about. In contemporary terms they probably looked at him like he was from another planet. "How could you not know what's been going on," they asked. "Where have you been?"

Adding to the irony, Jesus went along with them, and basically responded "Oh really, what happened?" Can't we hear our kids saying something like that as they act innocent when they're really not?

The two travelers explained their hopes that Jesus of Nazareth would be the one to deliver Israel in some sort of decisive victory over the Romans, but that their own priests and leaders charged him with breaking the law and handed him over to be crucified.

Then they mentioned the rumor from the women that the tomb was empty which, by the way, added another twist. If Jesus was so important, and there were rumors that he was alive, why were they leaving Jerusalem? This shows their lack of faith and the depths of their despair.

As they walked along Jesus explained to them everything that the Scriptures said about him, and when they reached Emmaus they invited him, still a stranger, to stay with them. He did so, and in a role reversal at the evening meal, Jesus the guest became Jesus the host and took bread, blessed it, broke it and offered it to them.

And at that moment they recognized him, and they knew that all the things he told them while walking on the road were true. Everything was changed forever. Despair became joy. They immediately returned to Jerusalem, found the other disciples, and shared their experience.

And here is the reason why the two disciples were unable to recognize Jesus right away. It was to make clear that Jesus does not force himself on us. He will not invade our lives like an uninvited guest. We have to ask Jesus to be with us just as the two disciples in Emmaus asked him to be with them. And he will become known to us in the breaking of the bread and in Scripture just as he became known to them in the same way.

III.

What does all this mean for us today? At some time or another, and with perhaps more frequency than we would like, we all walk our own roads to Emmaus.

We all have problems, pressures, difficulties, and disappointments in our lives. And just as the disciples on the road to Emmaus were so overcome with their own concerns that they were not able to recognize Jesus even though he was right there, the same can happen to us.

A famous painting by William Holman Hunt, called "The Light of the World," shows Jesus standing outside a house knocking on an old unused door overgrown with weeds. The notable feature of that painting is there is no knob or latch on the outside. It must be opened from the inside.

And as we open that door we are called to understand that Jesus enters to bring us to faith in his teachings, and to strengthen our reliance on his way. He does not necessarily come to us to support our worldly schemes or to strengthen us in our own agendas.

To illustrate this point, suppose I am driving down the road and see Jesus standing there as a hitchhiker. What if I would stop and say "Hey, Jesus, going my way? Hop right in. Glad to have you along." What's wrong with that picture? The problem is that I'm inviting Jesus in to do things my way, not his way. I'm asking him to go where I'm going, not where he wants me to go. But that's not what he calls us to do. He wants us to trust in him; not ourselves.

This means he wants us to ask him to stay, just as the disciples in Emmaus asked him to stay. But it also means that when we say "stay," he says "follow." He asks us to live our lives in ways that prepare us for God's kingdom, and he calls us to reach out to others in love and charity.

At times I have wondered what would happen if Jesus returned to earth early to get a first hand look at things before he really returns. And what if he returned *incognito* so that we, like the disciples going to Emmaus, didn't recognize him?

Now, I realize that Scripture doesn't say anything about Jesus coming back for a sneak preview, and in fact says when he comes again it will be in glory to establish God's kingdom.

But indulge me for a moment. Suppose he came anyway. Where do you think we would find him? On the golf course? Driving a BMW? Sitting in a corporate board meeting? No, not likely. And I'm not being critical here. People who play golf, drive BMWs, and serve on boards can be faithful Christians just like anyone else.

But if we really wanted to find Jesus, he would be where he always was. We would have to look for him today in the same places where people would have looked two thousand years ago. We would find him with the poor, with the needy, with those rejected by society. He would be on the margins of society, giving comfort to those who cannot help themselves, and bringing his peace to those who have no peace.

What does it mean for us to realize that most of the places we go are not the places Jesus would go, and most of the things we do are not the things Jesus would do?

Well, it does not mean that we all should quit our jobs and spend our time in homeless shelters, hospitals, or the mission field. It does mean, however, that we might consider more intentionally how we treat strangers and others less fortunate.

And the church is where it starts. The church is the body of Christ, and we are members of that body. If anyone here, like the disciples in Emmaus, feels broken in life, or distressed over a problem, or are even unsure of our your spiritual journey, you have come to the right place.

Here in this community, just as on the road to Emmaus, Jesus is here to comfort you, to strengthen you, and to love you. As you come forward later during the Eucharist, know that you will encounter Jesus in the breaking of the bread just as those disciples did two thousand years ago, and know that when you ask him to be in your life, he will be there.

And perhaps most of you are not in a place of darkness. Perhaps you are thankful for what God has done in your life. I pray that you would use your time this morning to praise God for your blessings, and that when you partake of the Eucharist in a few minutes you will hear our Lord calling you to share your joy and peace with others.

At the beginning of this sermon I said that this well-known story about the road to Emmaus helps us to understand our faith. Three important patterns show this to be true.

First, the story of the disciples on their journey to Emmaus is the pattern of Christian life. We have disappointments and problems in our journeys, but we can look to Jesus for comfort.

Second, the hospitality offered to Jesus by the two travelers to Emmaus is the pattern of Christian discipleship. Through the practice of reaching out to others we encounter God.

Third, what Jesus did in Emmaus is the pattern of Christian worship. Through the teaching of Scripture and the breaking of bread the Christian community comes together to share fellowship, praise God, and renew its faith.

IV.

The actual road to Emmaus no longer exists outside of Jerusalem, but the journey it represents is found in every human heart. Those who take the journey in the same spirit as the Emmaus disciples will be surrounded by Jesus' presence and God's peace.

Let us pray that our eyes will always be open to him, that our hearts will always seek him, and that our work in the world will always honor him. Then we can go out and share the Good News with others. *Amen.*