

"Jesus Out of Context"
Mary 5, 2019 (Confirmation Sunday)
St. Paul's UCC Church
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Luke 24:13-33a (The Message Translation)

¹³⁻¹⁶That same day two of [Jesus' disciples] were walking to the village Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem. They were deep in conversation, going over all these things that had happened. In the middle of their talk and questions, Jesus came up and walked along with them. But they were not able to recognize who he was.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸He asked, "What's this you're discussing so intently as you walk along?"

They just stood there, long-faced, like they had lost their best friend. Then one of them, his name was Cleopas, said, "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened during the last few days?"

¹⁹⁻²⁴He said, "What has happened?"

They said, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene. He was a man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God and all the people. Then our high priests and leaders betrayed him, got him sentenced to death, and crucified him. And we had our hopes up that he was the One, the One about to deliver Israel. And it is now the third day since it happened. But now some of our women have completely confused us. Early this morning they were at the tomb and couldn't find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn't see Jesus."

²⁵⁻²⁷Then he said to them, "So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don't you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?" Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him.

²⁸⁻³¹They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. He acted as if he were going on but they pressed him: "Stay and have supper with us. It's nearly evening; the day is done." So he went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared.

³²Back and forth they talked. "Didn't we feel our hearts burning as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us?"

³³They didn't waste a minute. They were up and on their way back to Jerusalem.

It's happened to all of us. You're at a baseball game, or you're out to eat, or you're at the grocery store. And then...out of the blue: "Hi! How ARE you?" The person who is speaking to you is smiling broadly, like they're your best friend in the whole wide world. Your mind starts racing. Do you know this person? *Should* you know this person? You squint. They look vaguely familiar, you think. "Hey... you..." you say. You're going through the rolodex in your mind. "I think I know this person... but from where?"

You think and you think, and by the time you figure it out ("Oh! It's my dentist! Oh! It's someone from Plymouth!"), it's usually too late.

But it's not your fault! This person was out of place! They weren't were you usually find them. It's not your fault. The person was out of context.

It's happened to all of us.

It happened to the disciples, too.

In Luke's gospel reading for today, we meet two disciples for the first time – Cleopas and an unnamed one. They are on their way to the town of Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. And these two disciples – they've had quite a weekend.

[Children/Youth to read parts]

Narrator 1: It's Sunday, just two days after Jesus has been crucified. Cleopas and the other disciple have so much to talk about. They have followed Jesus for so long, and have seen him do such wonderful things: heal the sick, drive out demons, argue with the religious authorities.

Narrator 2: But now he is gone...or is he? The question hangs in the air, because earlier in the morning, some of the women told them some strange stories: an empty tomb, rumors of angels, claims that Jesus is alive.

Narrator 3: So as the two walk towards Emmaus, they talk...and talk...and talk for what seems like hours. They are so deep into their conversation that they don't even notice him at first. When he speaks from behind, his voice startles them,

Jesus: "What are y'all talking about?"

Narrator 4: The two of them stop, dead in their tracks. They whirl around. He's standing right there. They squint. He looks vaguely familiar, but... they can't seem to place him. Cleopas is the first to answer

Cleopas: "You really don't know what's going on?"

Jesus: "No. What's happening?"

Cleopas: "Why, Jesus of Nazareth has happened!"

Other Disciple: "He was amazing! Dynamic, blessed, prophetic, miracle-working, demon-eliminating, maybe even the Son of God..."

Cleopas: "But our priests hated him, and killed him..."

Other: "But we had hoped he would be the one to save us!"

Cleopas: "And it's been three days since he died..."

Other: "But the women disciples just told us this morning that his tomb was empty..."

Cleopas: "They couldn't find his body."

Other: "And they said there were angels there, who told them that he was alive!"

Cleopas: "So some of our friends went to check it out later, but they didn't see Jesus..."

Narrator 5: The stranger suddenly laughs, interrupting their waterfall of words.

Jesus: "So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Can't you believe what the prophets have said?"

Narrator 5: He very nearly winks, and, passing them, begins walking towards Emmaus. The two disciples exchange quick glances with each other. *Who IS this guy? He looks so familiar.* They scurry along after him.

Cleopas: "And what might that be? What have the prophets said?"

Narrator 6: As the three of them walk on together, beginning at the Beginning, the stranger speaks about the prophets, and how they have predicted the Son of Man since the very start. As he speaks, as they walk, the two disciples keep glancing at each other. *Could this be...? Surely it isn't...? Are you thinking what I'm thinking...? But how could it possibly...?* Hours pass, and before they know it, they have arrived at their destination in Emmaus. The stranger falls silent. He continues to walk, going on ahead of them.

Cleopas: "Where are you headed?"

Other: "Please stay with us tonight! It's late. Have supper with us!"

Jesus: "Well, don't mind if I do."

Narrator 7: Once inside, the disciples hurry to prepare dinner. They are so excited, so full of hope, *could this really be...?* When they sit down to eat, the stranger asks if he might say the blessing.

Cleopas and Other: “Of course!”

Narrator 8: And taking the bread, he blessed it, and he broke it, and he gave it to them... sound familiar?

Narrator 9: Well, it did to them too. Because right at that moment, they know exactly who he is. They had started suspecting it on the road, when he was talking to them about scripture, but at this very moment, at the Table, their suspicions are confirmed. It's really him.

Cleopas and Other: “Jesus!! It IS you!!”

Narrator 10: They want to hug him, but before they can reach him, he smiles again, and vanishes. They look, wide-eyed, at each other.

Cleopas: “We have to go tell the others!”

Narrator 11: They grab their bags. They blow out the candles. And they're out the door, headed back to Jerusalem, faster than you can say lickety-split.

This is a great story. It's one of my very favorites in the bible. But, as great a story as this is, it leaves some pretty big holes. In my mind, it leaves at least one major hole, one looming question, which is, *Why don't the two disciples recognize Jesus at first?*

They've probably known him forever – they've probably witnessed his healings, listened to his sermons, oohed and ahed over his miracles. So, what's the deal? When Jesus appears to them on the Emmaus Road, shouldn't they know immediately who he is?

Maybe not. Maybe, these two disciples don't know Jesus because, well, he is completely and totally... out of context.

Here is a man who, upon his birth, was heralded by angels in this highest heaven. Here is a man who, when he was older, was tempted by Satan for forty days in the desert. Here is a man whom people wanted to throw off cliffs because of his preaching. Here is a man who has cast out demons. Here is a man who has cleansed lepers. Here is a man who has healed paralytics. Here is a man who has forgiven sins, calmed storms, fed five thousand, treated women as equals, been transfigured, hung out with criminals, blessed children, played the starring role in a fabulous parade. Here is a man about whom great crowds have shouted both “Hosanna in the highest!” and “Crucify him!”

Here is a man, in other words, who has done big things, who has caused great commotions, who has, for so much of his life, been surrounded by a lot of drama.

That is probably how these two disciples know him best.

So when Jesus appears to them on the Emmaus road, a dusty traveler, all alone, not surrounded by crowds praising him or shouting for his destruction, not

performing any wonderful miracles, not preaching any fiery sermons. When Jesus appears to the two of them, he is out of context.

So of course they don't recognize him. Of course they wonder who this simple, everyday traveler, right beside them, might be.

But that's the thing about Jesus. It's true that he does some pretty amazing, dramatic things, causing great commotions and gigantic crowds. He even does some of that today.

But if we recognize Jesus only in the big stuff, only in the so-called "holy" stuff – powerful church services, inspiring sermons, uplifting music – then we are missing something pretty important about him. He also shows up in the dust. He also shows up in what we might consider the most ordinary of places.

Since September, I've had the privilege to be part of our church's confirmation class. Alex, Marinza and Josie and I have learned together. We've laughed, and asked hard questions, and told funny stories, and listened. We've listened to each other, and we've listened to Jesus in the middle of us.

My charge for you three – and for the whole congregation – is this: keep listening for him. Keep looking for him. Jesus just might decide to show up at a committee meeting, here at church. He might be present with you in a conversation you will have with someone later this morning. And Jesus, don't you know, has a habit of breaking boundaries, of showing himself even beyond the walls of the church. He might appear in the stranger you meet later on. Or maybe you'll hear his voice in the music you listen to. Heck, you might just be just walking down the street, minding your own business, when BOOM! there he is.

The thing is, I can't tell you how Jesus wants to meet you on your own Emmaus Road. Yes, I believe he is here in the scriptures, and yes, I believe he is here in our congregation, and yes, I believe he is here every time we gather for this meal, or pray together, or sing together. But, really, those are the big moments, the traditional "holy" moments. If this story is true, though, I also believe that we are going to meet him in the most unexpected places, the most unimaginable situations, the dustiest spots on the road.

Jesus will come to us out of context. That's what this story is saying to us. My advice is simple. Josie, Alex, Marinza, everyone: *Expect it*. Any time your heart feels warm, even the teeniest, tiniest bit, anytime you find yourself sighing for no reason at all, anytime you think, "maybe, just maybe..." or "could it be?..." look, squint if you have to, and look again. It just might be that the Risen One has come to meet you along the way, and happens to be doing it out of context.

Thanks be to God.