

"The Dusty Road"
April 26, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
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Luke 24:13-33a (The Message Translation)

13-16 That same day two of them 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.

17-18 He 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?"

19-24 He 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."

25-27 Then 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.

28-31 They 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.

32 Back 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.

Where do we know God? Where do we feel God's presence? Is it in the so-called "holy places" in life, like at church, or in prayer?

Or can God in Christ show up anywhere? Can God surprise us, appearing in places we never thought God would be?

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

Last week and this week, we're hanging out in the Post-resurrection stories. Today, in Luke, it's still Easter Sunday, just two days after Jesus has been crucified. And these two disciples have so much to talk about! They have followed Jesus for so long, seen him do such wonderful things: heal the sick, drive out demons, argue with the religious authorities. 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.

So as the two disciples walk towards Emmaus, they talk, and talk, and talk, trying to come to grips with the news of an empty tomb.

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, "Whatch'all talking about?" he asks, or the rough equivalent. (I like making Jesus Southern). "What are y'all discussing so intently?"

The two of them stop, dead in their tracks. They whirl around. He's standing right there. Who is this guy?, they think. They squint. He looks vaguely familiar, but... they can't seem to place him.

Cleopas is the first to answer: "You really don't know what's going on?"

The stranger isn't fazed. He seems to almost smile, "No. What's happening?"

Now the two of them speak at once.

"Why, Jesus of Nazareth has happened!" Cleopas blurts out.

"He was amazing," the other quickly adds, "dynamic, blessed, prophetic, miracle-working, demon-eliminating, maybe even the Son of God..."

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

"But we had hoped he would be the one to save us!" chimes in the other one, nearly breathless by now.

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

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

"They couldn't find his body."

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

“So some of our friends went to check it out later, but they didn’t see Jesus!”

The stranger suddenly laughs, interrupting their waterfall of words. “So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Can’t you believe what the prophets have said?” He very nearly winks, and, passing them, begins walking towards Emmaus. Fascinated, their interest piqued, the two disciples scurry along after him. “And what might that be?,” Cleopas ventures, “What have the prophets said?”

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, now going on ahead of them.

“Where are you headed?” Cleopas calls from behind.

“Please stay with us tonight! It’s late,” says the other.

“Yes. Have supper! Make yourself at home,” Cleopas says.

The stranger stops and turns around. He smiles. “Don’t mind if I do,” he answers.

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. “Of course!,” the two exclaim at the same time.

And taking the bread, he blessed it, and he broke it, and he gave it to them... sound familiar? Well, it did to them too. Because right at that moment, they know exactly who he is. They had started suspecting it, back on the road, but at this very moment, at the Table, their suspicions are confirmed. It’s really him!

“Jesus!!” They say together, jumping up to embrace him. “It IS you!!” But before they can reach him, he smiles again, and vanishes. They look, wide-eyed, at each other. “We have to go tell the others!,” Cleopas shouts. 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. 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. They weren’t expecting him there, there on that dusty road, at all.

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, cleansed lepers, 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 worn-out 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 them, just talking, just to the two of them, Jesus is not where they expected him to be at all.

So of course they don't recognize him. Of course they wonder who this simple, everyday pilgrim, 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. Because Jesus also shows up in the dust. He also shows up in what we might consider the most mundane places.

Jesus might, for example, decide to show up at in a Facebook livestream. He might be present with you in a phone conversation you will have with someone later this week. Jesus may just show up in the face of your kids... imagine!

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 in our sanctuary, and yes, I believe he is with us every time we 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 when we least expect it. That's what this story is saying to us. My advice is simple. *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. Thanks be to God!