

Luke 24:13-35

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.

While today marks two weeks after our celebration of Easter Sunday, I invite us to go back to that day, to the third day after Jesus' crucifixion. Earlier this morning some women visited the tomb, found it empty, saw and heard from angels that Jesus is risen, and then Peter confirmed that the tomb is indeed empty! Jesus' disciples and we have plenty of evidence for belief, yet we find ourselves walking along with Cleopas and his unnamed traveling companion away from Jerusalem, *away* from the center of action. We are disheartened, perplexed, and returning to business as usual.

So as we're making our way to the village of Emmaus and talking amongst ourselves, suddenly a strange man appears and starts walking along with us, asking weird questions! Over the past few weeks, every time I've read the words, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?," I've pictured a similar kind of astonishment by imaging saying to someone, "Are you the only stranger in the world who does not know about this pandemic?!" The events that have occurred in Jerusalem are presumed to be

known by all. Just three days ago, darkness fell over the land for three hours in the afternoon. The curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom. A man's voice echoed across the land, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." This was no quiet event. There is no way to ignore the blast of the news feeds, the face masks, the empty airports, schools and streets. These events cannot be missed. But somehow these travelers believe that this man is truly unaware.

What I love about the way that Luke tells this story is that we are in on the secret from the beginning. We know it's Jesus when these two travelers are oblivious! We want so badly to interject, to snap them into realization, but the text says that their eyes are kept from recognizing him. Often times we assume that it is God who keeps their eyes from recognizing him, but the text doesn't actually say that. It's possible, of course. But we can't really draw that conclusion. So, let's suspend these assumptions for now and wait for another part of the story that might help us to discover more.

So, not only do these two travelers not recognize Jesus, and they believe that this man is truly clueless, they're also having a hard time making sense of the recent events. And this kind of perplexes me. They have quite a bit of evidence at hand. They have the direct testimony of the women and of Peter. They have witnessed the mighty words and deeds of Jesus himself and they've heard the declarations of the prophets their whole lives, but they still do not believe in the risen Lord. I think, though, we have a glimpse into their confusion when Jesus says, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Their confusion lies in the fact that they cannot make sense of a Messiah who suffers and is crucified. They don't have a mental category for that kind of thing. They can't see that suffering is the necessary pathway to glory. They were hoping that Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel, but it doesn't seem very redemptive for the savior to be killed! Rather it seems like the end of the story. I can see why they were headed home.

I have to ask...is it possible that we're having a similar kind of struggle? We have heard the testimony of the risen Lord, but when we look at what is occurring in our world, we, too, are confused. What kind of God would allow such suffering? It doesn't seem very savior-like for hundreds of thousands of people to be dying, for millions to be out of work, and for us to be away from one another when we need each other more now than ever. Like the two travelers, we had hoped...we had hoped that things would not have turned out this way. God seems no where to be found sometimes.

But I want to take another look at our stranger. The beautiful irony of this story is that the very one we are hoping to see is suddenly closer to us than we even realize! This story makes me laugh! Just when we think Jesus doesn't have a sense of humor, we come across this! Imagine for a moment what it felt like for Jesus to pretend like he didn't know, to innocently ask the question, "What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?" There had to be moments that afternoon when he stifled a smile and restrained his laughter. And I find great comfort in this kind of Jesus. He shows up when we need him the most. He is patient, asks questions, and listens. And Jesus relinquishes control of *his* story! He gives space for the travelers and for us to doubt, question, make sense of things, make mistakes, and even get to the point of giving up! *And Jesus gives himself* space to become frustrated and exasperated. It is consoling that Jesus, too, feels those big, human emotions even after he is risen from the dead! And I find it compelling that Jesus goes so far that he risks them choosing whether or not he will be invited in. I mean, there's a chance that the two travelers would have let him keep on walking. And that would have been a very different story.

So it's at the edge of the village of Emmaus where we find ourselves at the ultimate crisis point of the story! We already thought we hit the crisis point when Jesus said, "Oh, how foolish you are," but things are even more grim when it looks as though he is going to slip away! We, having the

inside scoop, want to stop the story and cry out, "It's Jesus! Don't let him go!" But thankfully something inside of these two weary travelers strongly urges this stranger to remain with them. After years of traveling with Jesus, being taught to both welcome the stranger and to be the stranger in the home of the other, it seems as though Jesus' teaching finally takes root. The travelers are doing what Jesus would do. They take the risk of welcoming in someone they don't actually know! And he hasn't really made himself super likeable in this story either! He has broken all the social conventions that our parents have taught us. He just appears and invites himself to the party, he is oblivious, he perplexes them and speaks in strange ways, he calls them fools, and now he isn't even wanting to stay with them! Yet they strongly urge him to stay anyway.

They have all reached the end of a very long day. The two travelers likely want nothing more than to catch some sleep and to get a bit of social distance from this odd man. But they find it within themselves to at least offer a little bit of bread.

I've been trying to imagine the scene at the table. They all three sit down or recline as they did at that time. Perhaps Cleopas is the head of this home and is about to perform the customary duties of the host, when their guest reaches for the bread and starts talking in his strange ways again! The travelers are about to lose it at this point, but he blesses and breaks the bread, shares it with them, and their eyes are opened! They practically fall over as they realize that it's been Jesus with them this whole time! I can see the looks of astonishment on their faces, and it fills me with such joy as we join in with their laughter and surprise. The two men and we don't even care that Jesus vanishes almost instantly, because the joy of the recognition is enough to carry us forever, even into the darkness.

And that's what strikes me about the whole second half of this story. It occurs in the dark. The darkness is coming on quickly in Emmaus as the travelers urge Jesus to remain. Their home is lit by just a few lamps when they have their moment of greatest revelation and discovery! And the darkness continues as the travelers risk the dangerous journey all the way back to Jerusalem in order to share the good news! It is in the darkness that they are able to see the clearest.

Speaking of seeing, remember what I said earlier about assuming that God is the one who keeps them from recognizing Jesus? I'm not convinced that this is God's doing. Instead, what keeps them from recognizing Jesus seems more to do with their willingness to fully welcome in this stranger. They don't see that it's Jesus until they take a risk of inviting in the stranger, of relinquishing control, and letting him become the host of the table. This is a story of hospitality.

So, here we are. We too are finding ourselves in a great darkness. Our lives are not going according to plan. We are overwhelmed by the bad news of suffering all around us, and like these two travelers, we are seeking to make sense of it. We had hoped...but now we're grieving the loss of our loved ones and thousands of people we don't even know. We are not able to be together as a community. We grieve the death of life as we once knew it. Like Cleopas and his companion, we are so deep in confusion and disorientation that we cannot see that Jesus is closer to us than we realized! Jesus is walking along this road with us. It might be a road that wanders around our living room day after day, but he is with us nonetheless! He listens patiently to our confusion and doubt. He cries with us as we cry painful tears of loss. His message, though, remains the same. Suffering always leads to glory, resurrection, and new life. So this finding ourselves in the darkness...this is exactly the place where seeing is most likely to occur!

I've been wondering over the past few weeks, where might Jesus be showing up as our stranger these days? Because of social distancing, he's likely not showing up to us too often in the physical encounter with a stranger. Although I don't want that message to be lost on us once we can be around people again. There is a resounding calling in Scripture to remain open to the stranger. To recognize the ways that God appears in the people whom we would least expect.

But during these current times, I'm wondering if the **isolation** is our stranger. For most of us, this isolation is unfamiliar and unwelcome. It just appeared and invited itself into our lives, and it's clearly not going away! So perhaps there is an invitation to recognize the stranger of Jesus who appears within it. As we embrace the quiet and the solitude, we recognize that Jesus is nearer than we have ever imagined. His table is still available to us. We are his guests, and he offers us our daily bread. Even though we are physically alone and isolated, the risen Lord is enough.

Jesus, too, could be showing up as the stranger in those who are in our very own homes. Though we have lived with our spouses, children, or housemates for years, this time offers us the opportunity to recognize that the people around us are still strangers to us in many ways! We have the opportunity to gather at the table, to break bread, and to come to know the risen Lord in one another in ways that we've never had eyes to see until now.

Or, maybe we have been strangers to ourselves for a very long time. Perhaps we have permitted our identity to be formed and shaped so much by the world outside that we don't actually know who we are anymore. In this time of isolation and distance, we have an opportunity to realize and embrace who we are in the profound love of God, to realize that it's been Jesus traveling with us this whole time.

So, my weary living room travelers, our challenge today is to not let the stranger keep on walking. Instead, we are called to welcome whatever and whomever feels unfamiliar and uncomfortable. To strongly urge them or it to remain with us. Because it is in the risk of welcome, in the relinquishment of control where we encounter the risen Lord. Amen.