

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Third Sunday of Easter- April 23, 2023

Scripture lessons: Luke 24:13-35

THEIR EYES ARE OPENED

It's no surprise that in the Sundays following Easter our church's lectionary often gives us stories about the appearances that Jesus makes after his resurrection. But there's also an odd and unexpected thing in many of those stories- namely, that people don't recognize him. When Jesus first appears to them, they think he's a stranger.

What's it like when you first turn on a light in the morning? You've been in the dark all night, but with a light on now strange things can happen to your eyes. Your vision gets a bit foggy. You're liable to bump into things.

The people Jesus appears to after his resurrection seem to have a similar experience. In relation to him, they've been in the deep dark as Jesus has been crucified, dead, and buried. But now that he is risen and his light is shining again, their vision is foggy. He appears, but they're puzzled and disoriented by his presence. They don't recognize him.

This is especially true in the Scripture passage that Tamyra just read for us from Luke's gospel. It tells the story of Jesus' appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. One of them is named Cleopas and the other is unnamed. We also don't hear about Cleopas anywhere else in the Bible.

That's one of the distinctive things about this particular appearance story. In the others, Jesus comes to people that we know more about- Mary Magdalene, for instance, along with the eleven of Jesus' specially chosen disciples, especially Peter, John, and Thomas.

But in today's story, we also know nothing about Emmaus. Where was it? And was there anything special about that village? Nobody knows. Luke says it was seven miles from Jerusalem, but no archaeological evidence remains.

That might be one of the main points Luke is trying to make. The risen Christ comes to us even when we're not well-known and even when we're headed to places that nobody else knows. The risen Christ comes to us even when our hopes are tattered, even when we're puzzled and disoriented, and even when our "eyes (are) kept from recognizing him". Which takes us back to the odd thing that I mentioned at the start. Why don't people recognize Jesus, risen from the dead, when he first comes to them?

Luke speaks about this in the same way every time, i.e., he describes it in the *passive* voice. For example, of these two disciples on the road to Emmaus he specifically says, "Their eyes *were kept* from recognizing him." Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "The Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands." He says this plainly and openly, but Luke still reports that "(T)hey did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it" (9:45).

I don't like that at all. I much prefer to think that I'm always in charge of my own perceptions, so that I'm always able to see whatever is there to be seen, as I choose. But Luke says that it doesn't work that way.

He says we can recognize the risen Christ only when we're ready to do so, *not* on our terms, but on Jesus' terms. Jesus knows when we're ready so much better than we do, so that when the time truly is right, he's always there. Until then, we're kept from recognizing him.

Why was this true of these disciples on the road to Emmaus? If we look at everyone else that the risen Christ appears to in the gospels, it takes these two the longest by far to recognize him. Why is that?

They've been walking along, talking about the momentous events that had taken place in Jerusalem over the past week. They had hoped that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah, but had seen him horribly crucified. Now, though, they have heard reports that his tomb is empty. They've heard that some of Jesus' women followers have claimed to have seen him alive again. They don't know what to make of all that.

As they continue, Jesus joins them and asks about their conversation. They don't recognize him, and initially seem a bit irritated by this "stranger" because he seems so ignorant of everything that's been going on. In what way, then, are they *not* ready to see him for who he really is?

Sadly, they're blinded *by their expectations*.

They've expected Jesus to be a warrior Messiah. They've wanted him to rout the Romans, to drive them out and set Israel politically free. Those wrong expectations have kept and still keep them from seeing Jesus as the Messiah that he really is. He's the Messiah who fulfills God's purposes not by being a triumphant warrior, but by being a "suffering servant".

So, what would these two disciples actually expect *now* if the reports of Jesus' resurrection are true? Would they anticipate lights from heaven or an angel choir appearing to sing, "Glory to God in the highest"? Maybe, but it's much more likely that they would expect along the same lines that they had before.

They'd likely assume that the resurrected Jesus would make swift and decisive appearances to both Pilate and to Caiaphas. He would come to those leaders who had authorized his death to let them know *in no uncertain terms* that *he* is back now and that *he* is in charge. The *risen* Jesus would emphatically let both the Romans and the Sanhedrin know that their days at the helm are numbered. THAT is what would make the most sense to these disciples on the Emmaus road.

Yet whatever their exact expectations might be, it's completely safe to say that they would *not* expect Jesus to sidle up quietly next to them on their way to Emmaus. They wouldn't expect him to appear as some ordinary stranger who's so totally in the dark about so much that's been going on.

It seems that they suffer from a lack of hindsight. With more distance and a bit deeper reflection, they might well have seen this coming. They might have recognized that the unexpected is exactly what they *should* expect from Jesus of Nazareth, risen from the dead.

After all, before his crucifixion, he had frequently confounded their expectations. He'd often been strangely different as he repeatedly turned out to be much more than what he had first appeared.

He didn't belong to the established religious leadership. Instead, he strongly criticized them. He didn't join the recognized revolutionary party that advocated for violent overthrow of the Romans. Instead, he preached nonviolent love. He didn't act like a conventionally ascetic prophet or holy man who traditionally would have adopted strict bodily disciplines and would

have gone off into the desert to live by himself, apart from everyone else. Instead, Jesus liked to party. He gained a reputation for being a hearty and happy eater and drinker.

In other words, Jesus so thoroughly did *not* fit into one of the usual modes of a mover and shaker. This meant that even his closest disciples repeatedly misunderstood him. In keeping with that, as he's risen from the dead, he now walks and talks *for hours* with these two disciples on the Emmaus road. But still, they don't recognize him.

As they reach their intended destination, however, these disciples see that night has started to fall. They notice too that the stranger appears ready to go on by himself. They know as well that walking alone at night on this road is a dangerous proposition, so they decide to open their home to the stranger. Luke writes, "They urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us.'"

They go in, sit down, and prepare to eat. The stranger takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. NOW their eyes are opened. NOW they can see who he really is.

But why do they suddenly recognize Jesus in *this* moment- "in the breaking of bread"?

It's because their eyes have been made ready by *their act of hospitality*. They had opened their hearts to generously welcome this stranger, so when they see him break the bread and bless it, they also suddenly remember the last time Jesus had done that with his disciples. In the upper room, before his death, he had broken and blessed the bread, saying, "This is my body given for you." Now that these two had opened their hearts wide in sharing their home with the stranger, their eyes are opened too so that they see Jesus for who he really is.

He is God's suffering servant. He is the Messiah who accomplishes God's will through his broken body and shed blood. He is the Christ whom God has raised from the dead in divine approval of Jesus' suffering path. The two disciples see now that through Jesus, God is calling them and us onto that same path, the way of suffering service.

It's no surprise that this is the sort of thing that our eyes are often "kept from recognizing". We're kept from seeing it, because if we want to see it on our terms, who doesn't want God instead to be a mighty warrior who will rout our enemies? Who doesn't want God to be and to act in our mold and according to our personally preferred expectations? And whose personally preferred expectations include a life that's devoted to suffering service? It's no wonder that our eyes are often "kept from recognizing" him. That is the case, until . . . until our hearts open to the ways of suffering love.

A woman gives birth to a baby boy. Her doctor comes into the room and says to her and her husband, "There are problems with your child. He has Down's syndrome and a serious respiratory condition. We can correct the breathing problem, but I recommend that you seriously consider letting nature take its course."

The woman and her husband are puzzled by this. The father says, "If the condition can be corrected, then we want it corrected." The mother fully agrees.

But the doctor says, "You have to understand. Studies show that parents who keep Down's syndrome children suffer from a high incidence of marital distress and separation. Even if the couple stays together, raising a Down's syndrome child inevitably brings stress and suffering upon the whole family. Consider if it's fair for you to impose that on your other children."

The mother replies, "Our children have had every advantage. They've never really known suffering. They've never had the opportunity to know it. I don't know if God's hand is in this or not, but I can see why it would make sense for a child like this to be born into a family like ours.

Our children will do just fine. When you think about it, raising our new son is a great opportunity for them and for us.”

Later, the doctor talks with the couple’s pastor who has come to the hospital for a visit. He says, “Reverend, help these people open their eyes to what they’re facing with this child. Help them get real about it.”

But the minister knows that this mother and father already have had their eyes opened. They’ve already become as real as they can be about their situation. They’ve clearly seen the path of suffering service that has been opened to them. They’ve seen how their lives as followers of the crucified and risen Christ will prove to be much more than what had first appeared. Amen.