

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/APRIL 11, 2010

## PAYING ATTENTION/LUKE 24:13-31

REV. DR. LYNN CHEYNEY

**I. THE TEXT:** This morning is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in the season of Easter – a season that lasts for 50 days, until Pentecost – May 23<sup>rd</sup> this year. For 50 days we continue to contemplate Jesus' resurrection and its meaning for our lives. On this second Sunday in Easter our text takes us back to Easter afternoon. Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene early that morning – Peter and John have seen the empty tomb and had raced back to tell the others. The news is stunning – confusion and disbelief swirl. We pick up the story Easter afternoon on the road to Emmaus. Hear the word of God...

*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup>While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup>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?' <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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.' <sup>25</sup>Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' <sup>27</sup>Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

*<sup>28</sup>As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>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?' <sup>33</sup>That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup>They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' <sup>35</sup>Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

**II. PRAYER:** May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God... our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

### III. SEEING

A story is told of Karl Barth, one of the most significant theologians of the twentieth century. Barth was on a streetcar one day in Basel, Switzerland, where he was a professor, when an American seminarian climbed on the streetcar and sat down next to him – the two men struck up a conversation.

“Is there anything you would particularly like to see or do while you are in Basel?” Barth continued.

“Yes,” the seminarian said, “I’ll visit the cathedral, of course, but it would really be great to meet the famous theologian Karl Barth. Do you know of him?”

To which Barth – known to fellow theologians for his wit – replied, “Well as a matter of fact, I do. I give him a shave every morning.”

Just then the seminarian’s stop came and so he said a quick good-bye, adding: “This is great – I can’t wait to tell the guys at home I sat on a tram with Karl Barth’s barber!”

It is not always easy to see what is right in front of us. Two of Jesus’ followers had a similar experience one afternoon on the road to Emmaus.

#### IV. ON THE ROAD

It was Easter afternoon, the first disciples were nursing deep disappointment. After the blur of the week and in particular the agony of the last three days we find them this Sunday afternoon numb and reeling... how do you regroup when life has caved in? Two of Jesus’ dejected disciples leave the company of the rest and are on their way to the village of Emmaus – a 2-hour walk from Jerusalem. We are not told **why** they are heading to Emmaus – perhaps cutting their losses, heading for home to begin getting their lives back to normal. Their conversation is a sad one – they rehearse the story – from waving palm branches to the garden, from the trial to his death. To add insult to their injury, the ridiculous reports of an empty tomb.

While they are talking a stranger joins them in their journey. We, the readers, are told that this stranger is Jesus but these two do not recognize him – after all, Jesus is 3-days dead – an unlikely candidate for a traveling companion. The stranger joins their conversation with a question – “so, what are talking about so intensely?” One of them, Cle’opas is stunned by the question – “where have you been, sir? There is only one thing in the news these days.”

If anyone already knew what had happened that week it was Jesus, but he urges them on anyway and so they tell him their “nothing has gone right” version of things. “We had hoped... past tense... we had

hoped, they say... but, we are hoping no more.” Our version of scripture says they reacted to the news of an empty tomb by calling it an “idle tale.” But the Greek (*leros*) is better translated as “foolish talk” or “nonsense.” Indeed, these were two frustrated, sad and perhaps a bit angry people.

Apparently unable to listen to their version of the events any longer, Jesus interrupts. “How foolish you are – how slow of heart!” Then, launching into a Bible 101 class, Jesus offers an alternate version of things. Walking them through salvation history, he concludes his lesson by reminding his traveling companions that, “these events should not be a surprise to you. It is written – your Messiah will be the suffering one, the broken one, the wounded one.” Jesus’ counters their “nothing has gone right” version with, “all has gone as it should.”

By this time they’d reached the outskirts of Emmaus – the time has come to part ways. An afternoon of conversation and they still do not realize whose company they keep. We cannot fault them, constrained by their expectations as they were – Karl Barth does not sit next to you on a streetcar and dead people don’t join you on your journey. They do not know who Jesus is, but what Cle’opas and his friend know is that they don’t want him to leave just yet. Models of middle-eastern hospitality, they talk him into staying.

The next scene finds us at the dinner table at Hotel Emmaus – Jesus, the stranger – their guest. Jesus reaches out, takes the bread in his hands, says the blessing, breaks the bread and begins to give it to them. It happens quickly – *deja vu*. Just days ago a blessing was said, and

bread was broken. It was in the moment of bread breaking, Luke tells us, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” Ordinary supper becomes sacrament. And then Jesus is gone.

The story goes on to report that after the fact – as they looked back on their afternoon journey with the stranger, only then could they make sense of it. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us?” Jesus had been with them all along and they didn’t even know it.

## V. NOTES

So many things to note about this story... among them...

**1. It happens in such an ordinary place.** Back from the dead and not even an interview with Oprah or an appearance on Good Morning Israel. Not one moment of it happens in a cathedral or parliament building – rather Jesus shows up on a road, at a restaurant, in a simple invitation to a stranger to share a meal. No state banquet for a dignitary but a simple meal of ordinary bread. But when Jesus shows up, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, the mundane turns sacred.

Frederick Buechner writes “Sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often everyday moments... if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our being and imagination... what we may see is Jesus himself.”<sup>1</sup>

Could it be that we sometimes miss Jesus because we expect, even demand, something that fits in with our sometimes rather narrow expectations? Miracles are “idle tales” if we are to be polite – “nonsense” if we are to speak honestly. And so, not looking for them, we miss them. A meal, a sunset, a hand tenderly held, an offer of help, a prayer – signs that Jesus has joined us on our journey. Something ordinary at just the right time.

**2. It happens with such ordinary people.** No Pope, professor, pastor or saint in sight – not even on the list of official disciples – two virtual unknowns – Cle’opas and someone else whose name Luke seems to have forgotten. We tend to think other people (never us!) are somehow closer to God – they pray better or know more, or believe more fervently. This story would tell us otherwise. Not only were Cle’opas and his friend regular folks, they were regular folks in a terrible funk. They’d given up hope, their faith was gone, they were giving up on Jesus – and Jesus shows up anyway. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “Jesus does not limit his presence to those with full confidence in him. He comes to the disappointed, the doubtful, the disconsolate. He comes to those who do not know their Bibles, who do not recognize him even when they are walking right beside him. He comes to those who have given up and are headed back home.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, he comes to people just like you and me.

Could it be that we sometimes miss Jesus because we have fallen for the nonsense that, like a bank that will only lend money to people who don’t really need a loan, God shows up only when our lives are so orderly we don’t really need anything or anyone (as if there is such a life!)? But instead, Jesus steps in before we are perfect, right into our brokenness, our imperfection, our messes... and loves us where we are.

**3. With Jesus, two ordinary people end up seeing difficult reality in a new way.** Note that Jesus listens carefully to their tale of despair. They walk for quite some time, Jesus listening as they pour out their pain and confusion. But then Jesus says, “you know, there is another way to look at this situation.” He gives them another interpretation of the weeks’ troubling events.

Could it be that we can miss seeing Jesus because there is still a part of us that believes that God’s job is to spare us from difficult things, to appear precisely as we expect (or even require),

to confirm our vision of how life ought to be? But Jesus reminds his companions, and us, that God is at work when things are good **and** when they seem most bleak, **and** in whatever ways God wishes to work.

## VI. ALWAYS THERE

I conclude with a story shared by William Frey, a retired Episcopal bishop from Colorado, in his book *The Dance of Hope*. He recalls volunteering to read to a student named John, who was blind.

One day, Bishop Frey just had to ask, “John, how did you lose your eyesight?” “A chemical explosion,” John answered, “I was thirteen.” Still curious, Frey asked John, “What was that like?” John responded, with brutal honesty, “Life felt like it was over for me, I felt helpless – I hated God with all my heart. For the first six months, I did nothing but stay in my room – I ate all my meals alone, by my choice.

Then a curious thing happened. One day my father entered my room and said rather sternly, ‘John, winter’s coming and the storm windows need to be up. That’s your job today. I want the storm windows hung by the time I get back this evening or else.’ Then John’s father turned and walked out of the room. John reported that he was so angry that he was thinking, “Who does he think he is? Who does he think **I** am? I’m blind.” John was so furious, he decided to do it. “I’ll show them. I’m gonna’ try to do it and I’m gonna’ be not only blind, but I’m gonna’ be paralyzed, ’cause I’m gonna’ fall. That’ll show them.”

John felt his way to the garage and slowly found the windows and located the necessary tools. He found the ladder, all the while he was muttering under his breath, “I’ll show them. I’ll fall – then they’ll have a blind **and** paralyzed son. That’ll be great payback.” But eventually, John completed his assignment; he got the windows up before evening. But the assignment was not about windows, of course – it was about his father’s real hope. John reported that it was at that point that he began to slowly realize that his life was not over – that he could reconstruct it.

John continued to tell Bill Frey his story, his unseeing eyes beginning to mist. “Seven years later, I learned something else important had happened the day he put the storm windows up – the whole day,” he said, “my father was never more than three or four feet from me. I just didn’t know it.”<sup>3</sup>

In the same way... as the first disciples, we so easily spend our days unaware of who is in the room with us, without realizing whose company we keep. Generally, Jesus’ ways are subtle, we are prone to miss them. Just because we do not see or recognize him in the moment does not mean he is not there. Carl Jung had these words of Erasmus, the Renaissance scholar, carved over the front door of his house in Zurich – ‘Bidden or unbidden, God is present.’ Later these same words were engraved on his tombstone. ‘Bidden or unbidden, God is present.’

It is not always easy to see the Christ who is always near even regular people like you and me, people with hopes and fears and expectations and demands. Yet Christ, still makes the ordinary sacred, still uses what is difficult to bring something good into being, still walks with us whether we believe it, whether we know it, or not. That is Easter’s truth.

**VII. PRAYER:** Lord, as we come to the table this day, be known to us in the breaking of the bread. Amen and Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Magnificent Defeat*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> As told by Keith Harris in a sermon titled *The Road Most Traveled*, April 10, 2005, 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church, Chicago.