

Luke 24:13-35

As I have been going for walks during this time of Safer-At-Home, I have noticed that many people I pass have been greeting me, and other persons, unlike they did in the past. Perhaps it is due to the feeling that we are "All in this together," as the Coronavirus is impacting each and every one of us. Now, it seems that more people will wave, or perhaps call out (while we are practicing social distancing) to say what a lovely day it is, or engage in light conversation. I certainly appreciate these examples of kindness and hospitality during this challenging time.

Taking this a step further, if we could think hypothetically, if we could safely walk, talk and journey together; what might our conversations with one another include? We would probably share our names and where we lived. We might talk about our family members and how we were dealing with the Coronavirus. We might talk about how it has impacted us emotionally, physically, spiritually, intellectually, and/or socially/ interpersonally. We might talk about the events of the day and any news updates that we had heard. All of these topics would be normal ways of interacting with a person we did not know.

Cleophas and his companion are journeying to Emmaus in our gospel passage for today. In some ways, their conversation might be like our hypothetical conversation (above). They know where they are headed, and they allow a stranger to join them. They think they do not know this person, so they most likely ask him simple questions. And perhaps like us, on this day, Cleophas and his companion carry something with them that surfaces during their conversation; their personal sadness or grief. Like those of us dealing with the uncertainty of the Coronavirus and the changes that have come with it, Cleophas and his companion are grieving the loss of Jesus. Even though they are not Jesus' disciples (the eleven), they are obviously Jesus followers who know about the events that have taken place in Jerusalem. It is the day in which Jesus' tomb was found to be empty, but in Mark's gospel, the women at the tomb did not see the resurrected

Jesus. So, when Cleophas and his friend decide to go to Emmaus, they travel on a day when they are filled with many unanswered questions. They do not know if the women's story about Jesus' resurrection is true. They are grieving the events of "The Three Days." They "had hoped" that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. They are walking to Emmaus filled with grief and uncertainty about the future.

This pericope is often referred to as, "The Road to Emmaus." Cleophas and his companion's journey includes many different "appearances" of Jesus; all of which are visible to them, yet which carry an element of invisibility, because Jesus' identity remains invisible to them. They are in fact joined on their journey by the risen Jesus in human form (although they do not know until they are in Emmaus that it is he); Jesus' word, which Jesus speaks to them, telling them of Moses, other prophets, his lineage, and more; and Jesus' body in the bread that he breaks. Yet Jesus does not allow them to know that it is he until he breaks the bread at supper. Then Jesus disappears, but Jesus' presence continues to be felt by them.

Perhaps Jesus is reemphasizing for those gathered at the meal the importance of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Perhaps Jesus is reemphasizing the importance of his word, which makes the bread (and wine) a sacrament. Perhaps Jesus is reemphasizing the presence of his body-- in, with and under the bread (and wine), by making a direct connection between his risen human body and the means of grace. Perhaps Jesus is reemphasizing his commission to his followers, for Jesus had asked them to go forth into the world to share the good news.

Mark's gospel doesn't report any resurrection appearances. Gary Habermas states, "[Y]ou still have him [Mark] reporting that the tomb is empty, and a young man proclaiming, 'He is risen!' and telling the women that there will be appearances. So, you have first, a proclamation that the resurrection has occurred, and second, a prediction that appearances will

follow.” (The Case for Easter, Stroebel, p. 75) But Jesus' resurrection appearances are not what the disciples expected. Jesus does not always appear in human form. At times he looks as he did before his resurrection; at times he is visible, but his face is unrecognizable to the disciples and followers (as in our gospel passage today); at times he is present in an invisible way, so that those in his presence do not realize at first that it is he. For example, in John 20, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. Scripture states, "...she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus." (v.14) "Supposing him to be the gardener..." (v.15) When Jesus does reveal himself to Mary, he warns her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (v. 17)

Could Jesus' appearing and disappearing have to do with his not yet ascending to God the Father? Is Jesus remaining "unknown" in order to observe in an earthly way how his disciples and other followers are dealing with their grief and loss after his death? Is this Jesus' way of testing them to see what they remember of his teachings and what they are now saying to people about him, his passion, and his resurrection? Is this Jesus' way of moving from his earthly human form to his heavenly form; a time of "transitioning" from this world to the next?

In today's pericope, even though the disciples do not know at first that Jesus is with them, they sense his presence. They say after Jesus vanishes, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (v. 32) Jesus' presence is felt, not seen. Is that not how it is for us today? We do not see Jesus in human form today in the way his disciples and followers saw Jesus 2,000 years ago, yet we know that he is present with us. At times, we may feel his presence even though we cannot see him. This is faith. This is the one Triune God, and especially the Holy Spirit working within us.

In some ways, it may seem amazing to us that Cleophas and his companion did not realize that the man walking with them was Jesus. They listened to his words about what Jesus had done while he was on earth, but they did not realize that he was Jesus. (The same Jesus who 20+ years earlier had amazed the religious leaders with his knowledge of God in the temple when he was 12 years old.) We wonder, how could these two Christ followers not know that this learned person was Jesus? How could anyone else share the word with them in such great detail? Jesus listened intently to his two followers, including their explanation of what had happened to him at the tomb and the women's description of his resurrection. Yet, when Cleophas and his companion asked if Jesus knew about the events of the past few days in Jerusalem, he did not acknowledge that he knew. We can only determine that Jesus did not want them to know it was he walking and talking with them.

This pericope reminds me of persons being called to serve in and for the church as ministers of word and sacrament, ministers of word and service, lay pastors, and lay leaders. Some are called through a dream, a vision, or a voice, while others are called through a "gentle nudging." One's call can come through one's senses--sight, hearing, touch--and in more holistic, intrinsic ways. One's call is not limited to one's mind, but may encompass one's heart, soul, strength and mind, [as we are to love the Lord God (Luke 10:27)] Perhaps you have seen, heard, or felt this yourself. Perhaps the "gentle nudging" or the "Wake Up Call" that you sense, may be repeated "appearances," visible or invisible, when God desires your attention.

This pericope also reminds me of persons who come to know Christ through hearing of his life, death, and resurrection. In my sermon of last week, I cited evidence of Jesus' resurrection presented in Lee Stroebel's book, The Case for Easter. The evidence includes an early creed. The gospels make no mention of the 500 people to whom Jesus appeared, but the creed in 1

Corinthians specifically mentions it. How can this be? Gary Habermas states, “First, even though it’s only reported in one source, it...[is] the earliest and best-authenticated passage of all.

Second, Paul apparently had some proximity to these people. He says, ‘most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.’ So, either Paul knew them, or he was told by someone who knew them that they were still walking around and willing to be interviewed. Habermas continues, “...you would never include this phrase unless you were absolutely confident that these folks would confirm that they really did see Jesus alive....Paul was virtually inviting people to check it out for themselves! He wouldn’t have said this if he didn’t know they’d back him up.” Third, when you have only one source, you can ask, ‘Why aren’t there more? But you can’t say, “This one source is crummy on the grounds that someone else didn’t pick up on it.”

“German historian Hans von Campenhausen says, ‘This account meets all the demands of historical reliability that could possibly be made of such a text.’ (The Case for Easter, Stroebel)

Our Christian journey involves walking and talking with Jesus, through reading his word and through prayer. We are all sinful people whose faith is small, but through God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, we know that all things are possible with God.

Lee Stroebel raised the many doubts about the empty tomb that I presented in my sermon of last week. He did not believe in Jesus prior to conducting his investigation into Easter, the tomb, Jesus' resurrection, etc... He concludes his book, The Case for Easter, in this way.

Because of the evidence, I now believed Jesus to be the Son of God. But to become his child, it was necessary for me to receive the free gift of forgiveness that he purchased with his life on the cross.

So on November 8, 1981, I talked with God in a heartfelt and unedited prayer, admitting and turning from all of my wrongdoing, and receiving the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus. I told him that with his help I wanted to follow him and his ways as best I could from that moment forward. Some people feel a rush of emotion at such a moment; for me, there was something equally exhilarating: the rush of reason.

Looking back, I can see that this was nothing less than the pivotal event of my

entire life. Over time my character, values, attitude, priorities, worldview, philosophy, and relationships began to change—for the good. So much so that a few months after I became a follower of Jesus, our five-year-old daughter, Alison—who had previously only known a father who had been profane, angry, verbally harsh, drunken, and all too often absent—walked up to my wife and said, “Mommy, I want God to do for me what he’s done for Daddy.” In effect, she was saying, “If this is what God does to a human being, then that’s what I want for me.

When Jesus enters our lives, we become new people in Christ. Even though we cannot see him, Jesus "walks" with us each day during our times of worry, doubt, grief, pain, confusion, and yes, happiness, too. Jesus is with us when we listen to his word and when we "feel his presence" in other ways. Perhaps like Cleophas, his companion, and others who experience Jesus through his "gently nudging," or issuing a "Wake up Call," we too believe that our lives are and will be better for knowing him. By believing in Christ’s death on the cross, by believing in Christ's resurrection, we follow him and have faith that with God’s help, all things are possible. Thanks and glory be to God.