

First Christian Church
“Opening the Eyes of the Blind”
Luke 24:13-35

There are three aspects of this story which jump out at me when I read it. The first is that these disciples, people who have sat and been taught by Jesus don't recognize him on the road. The second is their hopefulness in that Jesus was the Messiah come to bring them release from their captors and ultimately salvation for their souls. And the third aspect that grabs me is the sheer movement within the story. The disciples are moving, as is Jesus, and the entire story suggests movement.

I'll begin with them not recognizing Jesus. It's remarkably familiar to Mary's encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Though the scriptures go to some length to tell us Jesus was resurrected in full bodily form, Mary doesn't know who he is until he calls her by name. Somehow that serves as a trigger which jogs Mary's memory and suddenly she can identify him. She responds by calling him “Rabboni” which means teacher. The encounter these two disciples have on the road to Emmaus is quite similar. Though Jesus is again in full bodily form they don't recognize him. So what is going on here?

To me it suggests something Richard Rohr commonly begins with when he's in various teaching settings and he says, “People don't see the world the way it is, people see the world the way they are.” Mary and these disciples on the road are fully convinced, absolutely certain that the Lord is dead. Mary has seen Jesus crucified, it has happened before her very eyes; and these other disciples seem equally convinced of his death though there is no indication they personally witnessed his crucifixion. When we are convinced of something, whether that be through personal experience or through social interaction and stories being told, if we truly come to believe it then our tendency is to project it out onto the world.

Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about, but in kind of reverse form. When the Spanish first started exploring the new world they had to go around the tip of South America and one of the places they explored was Tierra del Fuego which is at the very tip of the continent. They would anchor their ships off shore and then take smaller boats in to the beach, but they discovered something very odd. The Indians who inhabited the land could not see the Spanish Galleons anchored off shore. At first the Spanish couldn't understand this until finally it occurred to them the reason they couldn't see the ships is because they had no concept of what a ship was. Because “ship” was neither in the Indians vocabulary or experience they couldn't see what was right in front of them.

This is sort of the same thing that's happening with Mary and these disciples. Because they believe Jesus has died and cannot be in their immediate presence any longer Mary can't see him standing right in front of her, and these disciples can't see him walking along beside them. To take this just one step further, in order to understand Jesus' teachings we have to get this particular concept down pat! We have to fully comprehend this existential aspect of Jesus' mind and teachings. Eugene Peterson says it wonderfully in *The Message* when he describes the sixth beatitude at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount: “You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.” (Matthew 5:8) You can't see the kingdom of God in the outside world until you see it within yourself. We don't see the world the way it is, we see it the way we are. This is why prayer and meditation are absolutely essential to the spiritual life, because prayer and meditation transform us from the inside-out.

These disciples on the road had also gotten their hopes up. They believed Jesus was the One who was sent to deliver Israel, but their hopes have been brutally disappointed. This is a place in the story which is easy for us to identify with, because life is full of disappointment and sometimes its crushing. Karen and I watched a movie last week about a woman who was part of a charismatic Christian church, but she struggled with her faith, and with things going on within the church. One event was especially troubling for her as her best friend developed a tumor in her brain. There is a scene in which she is lying in the hospital bed with her friend building her hopes up by praying for her. In another scene the entire church is singing hymns in the hallway of the hospital. Something that probably wouldn't be allowed in real life.

The point is there was much hopefulness coming from her friend, family and church family. The brain tumor is successfully removed, but tragically her brain is severely damaged during the operation. The next scene shows her at church during worship slumped over in a wheelchair with her daughter wiping drool from her mouth. Their hopes have been brutally disappointed, and this is not an uncommon experience. During my chaplaincy at Good Samaritan Hospital it was not uncommon to see a whole family enter the hospital, but by the time they left only a partial family remained.

On the other hand, and in my own personal experience, I have had my hopes exceeded at times. When I was first told I had a cancerous tumor on my kidney the doctor told me the whole kidney had to be removed. The second doctor with the second opinion said he could do it removing only one third of my kidney. After the surgery he stood by my bedside and informed me he only had to take one tenth of my kidney and all the cancer was removed. Sometimes hopes are exceeded! How about you? Do you have a personal story where your own hopes have been fulfilled or even exceeded?

I wanted to spend a little more time with hopes fulfilled, because after all that's how the text ends with Jesus and the breaking of the bread. But so often we find ourselves dwelling too much on hopes unfulfilled and the disappointments in life. Part of the reason we do that is because our brains are wired in such a way that negative things stick like Velcro, and positive things slide off like Teflon. So we really have to train ourselves to dwell on the positive, and in this case in hopes fulfilled. After awhile we start to get red flags when we begin to indulge in negativity too much, and can consciously shift over to more positive thoughts. It takes time and practice, but God helps us through prayer, Christian community and worship, and scripture. One of the best scripture texts devoted to encouraging the positive comes from Paul:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:4-9)

When I first became a Christian that was a very important text for me, and I've been practicing it all my life, and will continue to until the day I'm called home.

Just to end on my comments about hope, Karen shared one of last weeks Secret Place devotions with me:

Four-year-old Jackson awakened in his dark bedroom in the pre-dawn hours. Frightened by the eerie shadows on the ceiling, he called out to his grandma in the adjoining bedroom. Grandma...Grandma! Grandma hurried to his bed. "What is it Jackson?" she asked. "Can I get up now?" he wanted to know. "Oh no, honey. Its still dark," Grandma replied. "Oh, I thought it was morning," Jackson responded. "Will you sleep with me? I'm scared." "Sure," Grandma answered. After what seemed like an eternity, Jackson asked, "Is it morning yet?" "No, honey, not yet. Go to sleep now." After a few minutes Jackson sighed. "Grandma?" "Yes, Jackson." "Sometimes morning takes a very long time."

Jackson was right. Sometimes we face dark places in our lives: the futile job search, the dreaded diagnoses, the ever-growing stack of medical bills, grief over the death of a loved one, feelings of inferiority and failure, and the list goes on. Yes, sometimes morning does take a very long time to arrive, but it will come. God has promised.

PRAYER: God of the morning, please help us to place our hope in you, even when the night seems dark and long. In Jesus name, Amen.

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Another striking thing about this story is the movement. It begins with the disciples walking the road to Emmaus, when suddenly Jesus joins them. Now they're all in motion. All in all it contains at least nine verbs describing movement. The two disciples "are going", Jesus "came near and went with them," "he vanished from their sight", "they got up and returned to Jerusalem." Some of the verbs are describing what Jesus is doing and others are describing the disciples actions. Either way you look at it Jesus and his followers are on the move. But the motion, and the actions all have a purpose; and that is to tell the story of Jesus, and to have fellowship with him. Specifically that comes in the form of communion.

Certainly there are other stories in the Bible which contain a lot of movement. The Good Samaritan and the story of Jonah just to mention a couple. But this story has a very specific endpoint which happens at the breaking of the bread after they reach Emmaus. Because its at the breaking of the bread that "...their eyes are opened and they recognize him;" and is this not what Jesus does throughout his entire ministry? There are specific instances where he opens the eyes of people who are literally blind, but in a sense his ministry itself is about helping everyone to see. And what does he want them to see? God!

Right from the beginning he tells the devil in the wilderness to "worship the Lord your God," and even the demons know who he is as they identify him as the "Holy One of God." His healings are not meant to promote his own power, but are to show the possibilities of the healing power of God in a world enveloped in sin and disease. His preaching and teaching are ways of describing the various characteristics of God, and how people can "see" God more clearly not only in the world, but even more importantly within themselves. To see that it is possible to find the True-Self within and pursue it until that Self is what we ultimately identify with. Or as Paul would put it, "to be changed into his likeness." (1 Corinthians 3:18b)

The Lord in his teachings, healings and in particular in our story today is trying to open our eyes to what's right in front of us all the time. But we can't see it, even though ironically were seeing it all the time anyway. The real problem is there's just too many distractions. God is here right now. We know it. Our spirits know it, but our egos are so caught-up with getting to the next objective or some personal need or what were going to have for dinner tonight, that we can't see God. To see God we have to be right here, right now.

I'll never forget something Henri Nouwen said in one of his books. He said that without patience the spiritual life is not possible. Let me tell you a brief story to help make my point. We have been having a lot of work done on the house lately, because mold was discovered and it had to be removed. It so happened the people we have been working with, not the actual laborers, but the people who sell you their services are Jewish. Their names are Ben and Gatlin, and in the process they have come to be our friends. They even brought to me a vile of water taken from the Jordan River. Beyond that one day I came home to discover an Edible Arrangement had been sent to our home. It was given in appreciation of our hiring them to do the job, but also in support of me in the healing of my shoulder. It was an act of appreciation and compassion.

I immediately went to the Hallmark store and bought a thank you card, but was unable to find the address for their company. I wanted to get this card to them, but had no way to do it. This was a bit troubling for me until it occurred to me to be patient. Though we didn't expect to see Ben or Gatlin again, unless they wanted more money, I just decided to wait and see what happened. Last week I went home for lunch and Ben just happened to be there. We just sort of crossed paths. So I went into the bedroom and wrote their names on the envelop of the thank you card and gave it to him. Because I was patient I was able to give him the card in a personal, more meaningful way than mailing it to the company address. Which may have resulted in them not getting it at all. That's just a short and simple story about patience and the value of waiting for the right moment.

These disciples on the road are also being very patient. It has never been determined where Emmaus is, but it is generally suggested it was about 7 miles from Jerusalem. That's a fair walk which might take 2 or 3 hours. They have to be patient with themselves as their hopes have been dashed. They have to be patient with Jesus as he gets a bit perturbed with them and their inability to interpret the events. And again it seems Jesus isn't even going to stay for supper, but they talk him into it. This is a story about recognition, hope and movement, but it's also about patience, and the importance of waiting until God does what God does best. Waiting until the Spirit moves to open our eyes to what is always right in front of us. Right here, right now.

Rev. Mitch Becker
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