

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 35: 5-6; 8-10
SECOND LESSON: Luke 24:13-35
April 23, 2023

“Recognizing Jesus”
Sermon© Lisa C Farrell

I am terrible with names. I have to really work at it. I find it helps if I write the name down right away. If I don't do this, as soon as the new person I have just met is out of my sight their name disappears. I will remember their face. I will remember their marital status and if they have children. I may even remember the mean thing their cousin said to them 10 years ago if they happened to tell me about it. But names . . . that's another kettle of fish altogether. My grandmother used to hang on my arm on Sunday mornings to get in to church and she once said to me out of the corner of her mouth, “I can't remember any of their names, so I just call them all ‘dear’”

The disciples on the way to Emmaus *should* have recognized Jesus. We don't know why they didn't. They were close enough to the inner circle to know all the main players. But the story of the two disciples encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus is often told in a two-dimensional way. We tell the story, but we don't live it. We pass judgment but fail to put ourselves in their place. These men were in a state of shock. Their entire world had just been demolished. And the loss they experienced was two-fold. First, they lost hope in something outside of themselves. Second, they lost confidence in their own ability to judge the truth.

The first loss is the type of loss we would feel at being told, *you will never be able to have children, you have cancer, your loved one has died, the business you built up for years has just gone bankrupt and there is nothing is left, your home has been completely destroyed.* It is staggering loss, sudden and total. But the second more insidious form of loss would be right behind it, because in this case they believed passionately in a man and a cause, and would have been grappling with the idea that they had been wrong. We all depend upon our own judgment and senses to interpret the world around us. The idea that we could be fooled is abhorrent to us. One of the reasons con men get away with things is that no one wants to admit they have been conned! Imagine being in the position of these men. They believed with all their hearts that Jesus was the one—only to see him crucified. They may have been saying to each other, “How could we have been so stupid, so naïve, so wrong about this man!” It's like being the spouse of a serial adulterer and only finding out after 30 years of marriage. It's like having a trusted business partner only to learn that person is a crook and has emptied the accounts. “How could I have not known?” we ask. “What is real? Who can I trust?”

These two men, Cleopas and his friend, were not in a good place. They were going home to regroup. They probably stared blankly ahead, and walked on automatic pilot. They tried to make sense of the disaster that had just happened. And then a stranger joined them. He asked them what they were talking about, and they answered, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

Jesus, of course, said, “What things?” And the answer came pouring out. Just like today, it was politics. All crucifixions were political. The Romans crucified people for sedition. Everything that happened was political. The Sanhedrin schemed against Jesus and won. Those in power were still in power. Evil continued to rule. Injustice was unabated. Hope was destroyed. They proceeded to tell him all about Jesus, how he was a great prophet, how the chief priests and rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him, how they had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And then, they added, it’s been three days since this happened and some of the women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels. *How crazy is that?* And the angels said he was alive. And then some of the men went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.” We can practically hear their agitation. Sorrowful and totally confused they did not know what to make of any of it. “We had **hoped**,” they said. They had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel and put everything right, and that hope was not answered.

Grief drains our energy. Grief is exhausting. But staying still does not always work either, and so they walked. There was no peace, no justice, no redemption out of this anywhere to be found. And then the stranger began to talk. He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses (which means the first five books of the bible) and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures. Over the course of several hours Jesus pulled out scriptures one by one. He knew them all by heart. He could quote them perfectly. And he tied them together in a way that they had not seen before.

As they arrived at Emmaus their hearts began to wake up. Something was going on here. And so these two men did the next right thing. Jesus acted as if he were traveling further but they offered hospitality. Hospitality is a spiritual act. Welcoming the stranger is a central part of our faith. They urged him to stay. It was getting late in the day. Once darkness fell the roads were not safe. We are even told that they “urged him strongly.”

Jesus accepted the invitation. And as they sat down to eat he did something very unusual. As a guest it was not Jesus’ place to offer the blessing. This was an honor reserved for the host. Yet Jesus acted as the host here. He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them. At that moment what they had been unable to see, they saw. Their eyes were opened **and they recognized him**. And the minute they did, he was gone. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” And that very night they packed up,

turned around, and walked back to Jerusalem, easily a four-hour journey on foot.

Why did Cleopas and his friend not recognize Jesus before this? Was it because they knew that Jesus was dead, and therefore this man could not possibly be him? Was it because they had been through an emotional wringer and couldn't even think straight, much less see straight? Did he look different in any way? Does a resurrection body look different? We don't know. But what we can say is that it clearly wasn't an automatic conclusion for the disciples to say Jesus rose from the dead. **None of them believed it until they saw him.**

This is not just a straightforward happy ending to the story, because time did not reverse itself and all of the bad things did not come undone. Cleopas and his friend still had a lot of work to do. All of their prior beliefs and assumptions would have to be taken apart one by one. Their world was still annihilated, just annihilated in a new way.

It's not always easy to recognize Jesus. God's plans and God's ways are very different from ours. We have an American definition of success that does not match up to God's. The American dream is about making money. The kingdom of God is not. The earliest disciples had to come to grips with the fact that Jesus was not going to drive out the Romans. Jesus was not going to bring political revolution. Jesus was not going to bring prosperity and ease. We have to learn that having faith in Jesus does not mean we will never suffer loss or struggle with illness or trauma. Furthermore, despite the lies of the prosperity teachers, God promises to give us what we need, not more than what we need, and expects us to be generous to our sisters and brothers so God can also provide through us.

Jesus is at work in our world, but we don't always recognize him because we are often looking for the wrong things or in the wrong places. And every now and then what we want for ourselves and what God wants for us collides. Our assumptions about what is good are usually "this world" based. That's understandable. But God has an eternal perspective. Jesus helped Cleopas and his friend make sense of things. He opened their eyes to what the scriptures really said. And in our journey through life Jesus will do the same for us. A deeper spiritual walk is not an easier walk, but it is the way that leads to God. It is truth and grace and enduring love, and in this journey we will never walk alone. Amen.

Isaiah 35: 5-6; 8-10

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.

The unclean will not journey on it;

wicked fools will not go about on it.
⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Luke 24:13-35

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

¹⁹ "What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, "It is true! The

Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.