

What You Need to See Jesus

The Rev'd Andrew Van Kirk

April 30, 2017 (Easter 3 [Year A, Luke 24:13-35])

St. Andrew's Westridge

The French theologian Jean-Luc Marion suggests that the disciples were unable to see the risen Jesus when he joined them on the road to Emmaus in the same way that you or I are unable to understand a conversation in another language.

We've all had this experience. There is a Starbucks on Royal Ln and Abrams Rd in Dallas where I used to go occasionally to work. Generally, I find any coffee shop a terribly challenging place to work, because I am distracted by others' conversations. I'm nosy, and coffee shops are full of noise to stick my nose in. But this Starbucks was great, because most of the conversations around me were in Ethiopian. What was being said may have been brilliant or banal, but to me it was just noise, for I don't speak Ethiopian.

What Marion is getting at, is that analogous to the way I don't speak Ethiopian, we don't see Resurrection. In this story, it's not that risen Christ wasn't really there, but rather his risen-ness was essentially incomprehensible to Cleopas and his companion. They were missing something they need to be able to see him. When a spoken language is incomprehensible to us, we know what's missing. We're missing a facility with that language.

But when the resurrection is incomprehensible it's something else we're missing. My sermon this morning is about that something else. What is it that we need to see the risen Lord? And where, oh where can it be?

What made these two disciples "foolish" (that's Jesus' word for them, not mine) would seem to be that he was standing right in front of them and they couldn't see that it was him.

But that's not the foolish thing Jesus pointed out. Jesus said it was that his suffering, death, and resurrection remained impossible to them, despite the testimony of the scriptures. "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!"

The disciples were slow to believe. They were slow to faith. That was the thing they lacked — faith.

These were one-time followers; disciples who had put their trust in Jesus, and had “hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” They had Jesus at one time, but they had lost Jesus. Lost him because they couldn’t stand the shadow cast by the cross; because his suffering smothered their sense of his power; because, quite simply, he was dead to them. Each of us, to say nothing of those outside these walls, is liable to make the same mistake. Though because the gospel story comes to us written, rather than lived, we’re liable to lose Jesus in our own suffering, or someone else’s, rather than his.

These two disciples traveling to Emmaus knew he suffered and died. They were there, in Jerusalem, when it happened. So to expect them to see their companion on the road as the risen Jesus is to expect a lot.

It’s akin to expecting the operator of a backhoe digging up a mass grave to utter an “Alleluia.” To expect the wife whose husband’s heart has been stopped by opiates to shout “He is risen.” Or to expect the young mom, a friend of Stephanie’s, who lost her two month old son to SIDS this week, to whisper “My Lord and my God.”

Easter is actually really disrespectful towards death.

So Jesus when met these two disciples on the road outside Jerusalem, they didn’t believe in Easter. But Jesus came to bring them to the faith they so desperately lacked. This faith came not from a vision of him — that they had plainly before them, but they could not see it. And again, it’s not the eyes though that were the problem, anymore than my inability to understand Ethiopian is a problem of my ears. No. It was their hearts and minds. And so Jesus got to work on their faith, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

This divinely ordained and divinely led Bible study is where Jesus started this process of faith. The first step was word. And then he ended it at the table.

Arriving in Emmaus, Cleopas and his companion invite Jesus to stay with them. Then, “when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.”

“On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples.”

It only when Jesus repeats the pattern of the Last Supper that the disciples suddenly see the presence of the risen Lord right in front of them.

Our story, remember, happens on the first Easter Day. So the disciples in the story hadn’t yet had years of Sundays at church to see the sacramental pattern in Jesus’

action. But they probably had eaten with Jesus before his death.

In contrast, the first hearers of Luke's gospel probably had years of Eucharistic meals under their belts, but, in all likelihood, had never dined with Jesus before his death. In that regard, they weren't much different than us. And the vexing question — for them and for us — is whether we're missing something. Is our faith different? Is it harder? Less secure? Who among us has never thought — “If only I could have been there...”

The great New Testament scholar Raymond Brown suggests we pay attention to what Luke is telling us. Even the people that were alive and in the inner circle of the disciples didn't know Jesus until the scriptures were opened and the common meal was shared. Until they had experienced both word and sacrament — which is the basic order of the church's common and ageless worship, even ours this morning. Brown puts it eloquently: “In the manner of encountering the risen Jesus with faith, a past generation is not more privileged than the present one.” I'll put it more bluntly: “The disciples on the road to Emmaus ain't got nothin' on us.”

Then, the moment they see him, Jesus disappears. In the blinding sudden flash of recognition, Jesus vanishes.

I wonder if he took the food with him? ...And behold, Cleopas sighed, “Awww, I was hungry.”

Jesus vanishes because it's never been the sight of him that's been the point anyway. The sight of him had been there the whole time — they had hours of seeing him. The concrete experience of the risen Lord, that which we think we most want to ground our faith, is actually too incomprehensible for us to glimpse without faith. Marion explains that only faith provides “the strength to bear the glare of [the Resurrection's] brilliance.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, there's this great scene about this same phenomenon. It's after Easter, and the risen Jesus meets the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, just as he had promised to do. And the Bible says when the disciples “saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted.” Because Easter is a question of faith, not of sight.

What we hear in our Emmaus story is that scripture, and community, and communion — these things that are so much at the heart of church — these work together to bring forth faith, and faith enables us to experience the presence of the risen Lord. We abandon scripture, community, and communion, or even just cut back on the frequency with which we participate in them, at the risk of our faith, and so our experience of God.

Each Monday in our staff Bible study, we usually read the gospel appointed for the following Sunday. This week, Fr. Mike commented that whenever people ask him, “If you could be anywhere, at any point in history, where would you be,” he always says, “Right here, listening to Jesus open up the scriptures like this. Of all the sermons to hear...”

As great an answer as that is (and particularly for a priest, I mean, it’s way better than saying “Woodstock” or something) — I don’t think it makes sense. You couldn’t be there listening to Jesus. You could only be there listening to some stranger you met on the road expounding the scriptures.

Remember, as soon as the disciples recognize him, he will disappear. Our coming to faith can’t come so directly, otherwise it would simply be our coming to knowledge. To put it another way: the death of Christ is a matter of knowledge; the resurrection of Christ a matter of faith. That’s how God wants it — I think because faith produces hope and possibility in a way that knowledge never can. Faith is not something to be grasped or controlled, but something to be lived into. Faith is a future oriented word.

The way the Bible describes their recognizing Jesus is that “their eyes were opened.” Then, after he’s gone, the disciples will speak with one another about Jesus’ “opening the scriptures” to them. Opening things is the manner of Christ, to open for us new life and new possibility. This is the life of faith.

The very moment Jesus got the disciples to the point where they realize what was promised about his death and resurrection has actually happened, he left them to live into what will happen. Because faith pushes us toward what will happen, not what did.

The gift brought by the rehearsal the past, of reading the scriptures, of doing things “in remembrance” of him, is the faith to live into the future. We’re here today because of what God did in the past, but we’re here for what God will do today, and tomorrow, right on into eternity. I pray, in all sincerity, that you would be shocked to recognize the risen Lord in front of you today. But I pray too that when he vanishes to go on ahead of you, you would follow in faith. Amen.