



## *“Recognizing God”*

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

Luke 24:13-35

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Third Sunday of Easter

What a joy it is to be back with you this morning and to bring you greetings from New York Theological Seminary. Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims has had a long and fruitful relationship with NYTS. We appreciate all that you have provided in the way of support over the years and in your commitment to our students who have learned so much here in their field education placements. You are an important partner with us in ministry, and an important part of the overall fabric of faith that makes Brooklyn and New York City such a vibrant and creative place to be. Thank you for this.

A friend of mine, when I told him I would be preaching here this morning, sent me a copy of Debby Applegate’s recent book *The Most Famous Man in America: A Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*. I have reading it all week to catch up, not only on the fascinating life of the first minister of this congregation, but much of Brooklyn’s 19<sup>th</sup> century social life and politics. They were not much different than they are today. Unregulated banking and corporate irresponsibility in the years after the Civil War had driven the economy to the edge of a crisis. Governmental incompetence was appalling. All kinds of scandals were swirling around leading figures of church and society. Applegate makes a good case that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

We’ve had our own fill of crisis these past several weeks. The governor’s office of New York State will never be the same after the month that we have just had. We’ve all learned more about the personal lives of politicians than I think we ever imagined or wanted to know. And it is not just New York. New Jersey’s former governor and the mayors of Newark and Detroit – it is all very bizarre.

Reading the daily papers, one easily gets the impression that official misconduct is really on the rise. But it could well be that official misconduct is not really on the rise at all. It could well be that we are simply living through a period in which there is greater scrutiny of public officials and public lives. The internet is helping out here in a big way. If you are a public figure you can hardly expect to say anything of a controversial nature and not see it show up on YouTube within 24 hours. Bloggers delight not only in uncovering information, but in making every private fact public, and revealing every secret.

The irony is that all of this scrutiny does little to allay our basic suspicions that things are going on in secret that are not right and that need to be exposed. The more we find, the more we come to expect to find. Exposing the details of official misdoings does not satisfy our need to know all that is going on. It only fans the flames of suspicion that there is more, still, that we do not yet know about. So the scrutiny increases. More snooping, more investigating, more looking around for misdeeds and misdirection in

places high and low leads to more findings. The more you find, the more you suspect and the more that you suspect, the more you look and find.

Do not get me wrong. I am all for transparency in government and banking and even in religion. It is absolutely essential to building and maintaining faith in our institutions. But it may be time to say that too much transparency is putting us all on overload. It may be that we need a little break from transparency, if even for a little while. Opaqueness may not be bad all the time.

Of course for those of us in the non-profit world, saying this comes dangerously close to being charged with heresy. "Transparency" is more than a buzzword in the non-profit sector. Transparency has become the mantra of good governance, or of best practices as they say. Like "branding" – another buzzword that is making its way around the non-profit world and ought to be showing up soon in William Safire's column "On Language" in the Sunday magazine section of the *New York Times* (if it has not already done so).

Transparency is regarded as a principle virtue in the handbook on good governance.

Except that I have learned as a Seminary president these past 18 months that it is not always a good thing to be totally transparent in your dealings. Sometimes you cause more harm by telling people what you are thinking, or what the worse possible options might be. A friend of mine who is an economist pointed out to me recently that 90% of the economy at any given time rests upon expectations, fears, desires and perceived needs; and that these are psychological factors, and not material realities. As such they are not easily measured. Undergirding them are often perceptions more than hard economic facts.

Do not get me wrong: We are desperately in need of full disclosure and transparency in our institutional book-keeping in this society, without question.

Everyone I read in the *Wall Street Journal* and elsewhere is telling me that it has been a lack of full transparency in the credit industry and in the banking world in general that has brought our economy to the verge of this crisis in recent months. But the lack of transparency regarding *the future* – the fact that we do not know what tomorrow is actually going to bring – is ironically a necessary ingredient and maybe even the very basis for our hope that there is in fact going to be a better day coming, a brighter future, a recovery in store for us in the months to come.

The lack of transparency regarding the future – the fact that we cannot clearly see where things are going, no matter how much we plan, no matter how much budgeting we do – is matched – interestingly enough – by a lack of transparency regarding the past, regarding history. No matter how much we study the past, no matter how much we dig around in history, we keep finding that there is more that was going on than we knew, back then when it was happening and now, looking back at the record.

We cannot say for sure all that has gone on in the past, concerning human history. Even more so, we cannot say for sure what has been going on in the past concerning the divine. We cannot see the divine ledger. We cannot say for sure what God has been up to, where God has been, or better, how God has been there. I used to say that studying church history was looking for footprints of the Holy Spirit in human history. I'm not so sure I would say that any more. I am not so sure that I would even know what those footprints might look like any more. We cannot see clearly what God has been being here and there in human history, what God has been doing behind closed doors or out in the open.

Now, historians delight in being the auditors of historical memory. We get to uncover the past and tell it like it really was. We pry open the archives of public memory and go

digging through the accounts and records, looking for evidence of what people said, did, and thought they meant when they said what they said or did what they did in days gone past. Historians revel in transparency, in trying to make the past transparent.

But there is this strange opaqueness that always seems to set back in. As a historian I find that just when I think I can see what was really going on, just when I think I have gotten a grasp on what actually happened, a certain fog sets back in, what seemed clear gets clouded, and those events of the past that I thought I had gotten a handle on just slip out of my hands. Some new piece of evidence actually turns up. What once seemed like a securely established fact turns out to be a conviction based upon flimsy evidence. And I watch the waves of time itself come crashing in on the history I have reconstructed, washing it away like a sand castle before a rising tide. Time and history itself go to work, erasing things, reconfiguring things, and making them opaque once again.

Our lives are like that, are they not? We from time to time reach a point where we find a bit of clarity about who we are and what we are about and even where we are going. We set up a life plan. We create a resume with some objectives listed up near the top – or maybe just one objective, that would be enough. We find a bit of a clearing in our emotional situation, a free space where we can stand firm, an emotional space where we feel we have a handle on what is going on and actually can exercise some agency in here.

But then it happens. Life sets in and messes up the plan. Markets crash. Relationships burn. The resume fails to get you even an initial interview. You thought you were back in control, but soon learned that control is an elusive quality and events rule us more than we rule events.

Truth be told, most of our lives we really are driving without seeing. Most of the time we really are traveling on faith, moving ahead on faith, depending on faith. Whether it be blind faith or partially obscured faith makes little difference. The truth is, we do not ever fully see where we are going in life. We go there by faith. This is good. This is the way it should be. We've been led by some in the modern age to think that seeing is believing. But actually this is not so. It is more true to say that believing is seeing.

Kierkegaard warned about that, thinking that history or science or mathematics could provide us with a certainty that was beyond doubt. No such certainty exists in the world of science and history and fact, he warned us, because all such scientific truth, all historical truths, have methodologically built in an element of doubt. They are always open to falsification and thus can never be final or absolute truths. Even experience itself is always open to being proven false, he noted. The only certainty in truth is found in the certainty of faith.

Faith is not the absence of doubt, Kierkegaard noted for us. Quite the contrary, faith is a certainty that exists right along side doubt, as its twin in fact. Faith and doubt are not opposites. Faith and doubt coexist within one soul. They are two sides of the same cutting edge of history, two sides of a common blade that intersect in the moment of an encounter with the divine, at the moment of commitment. "Lord I believe. Help thou my unbelief."

Faith is not the absence of doubt. Faith indicates the presence of doubt, that you have reason to doubt but are choosing to embrace another set of warrants, a different paradigm of knowledge, one that you will move you ahead, allowing both of them to proceed side by side. Faith always implies an element of doubt. No one ever mistakes faith for seeing clearly. I have no proof, no evidence, no secure warrant for believing that my life is going to work out in the end, or that someday I will be able to look back

over it and say, "That was good; that made sense." Nevertheless, I get up in the morning and set off into the day as if my life made sense, as if there were a goal to things, and as if I was going to achieve this goal. I have faith.

This faith entails a knowledge of the heart, not the mind.

Let me say it a bit differently. We don't see nearly as clearly with our eyes as we see with our hearts.

Or to say it a bit differently still, the things that I know in my heart, I know them better than the things that I know in my head, in my mind.

"Did not our hearts burn within us?" the travelers on the road to Emmaus asked each other in Luke 24:32, in the reading from our Gospel text this morning.

Who were these two travelers? Luke does not tell us, other than to give us the name of one of them – Cleopas – and imply that they were both a part of the circle of disciples that had followed Jesus to Jerusalem.

And as they were talking and arguing, Jesus drew up along side them. Except they did not know it was him. He had become opaque to them. He had become hidden. He had become difficult to understand.

Their eyes had become held in check, Luke writes. The events that had taken place had obscured their vision, changed their picture of the world, hidden him from their view. This happens from time to time to us, does it not? We think we know someone or understand someone. And then events take place and suddenly everything that we thought was solid melts into air.

They told this stranger – the only stranger in Jerusalem who seemed not to know what had come to pass. "This man, Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet who was mighty in deed and word before God – we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

It had all seemed so clear. Things are bad so the prophet of God shows up. We have a revolution, the prophet and his armies win, and we set up a new kingdom and now the righteous rule.

This had seemed to be the way things were going. His entry into Jerusalem had been exhilarating and that cleansing of the temple – he had turned their tables upside down and gotten away with it. Things seemed so clear. History had all become so transparent. The end was right there clearly in sight – judgment, angels, fire from heaven, redemption of the Israel.

But things had gone wrong. The chief priests, the religious leaders, who should have recognized him, handed him over instead to be crucified.

"We thought it was all pretty clear and straight-forward. Things get bad. The prophet of God shows up. We have a revolution and the prophet wins, overthrowing evil and setting up a new kingdom in our midst."

But this is not how it went. The man, he got himself crucified. We had hoped he was the one, but then he went and ended up on a cross.

He ended up an utter failure. No angels came to take him down, no armies descended from the heavenly realm. Events had seemed so clear, but then history had become so opaque again.

"And just to make matters worse, more confusing, more obscured, some women from among our group went this morning to care for his body. But when they arrived, they did not find a body, only angels who said he was alive."

Then the stranger answered them: "How mindless you are, and dull of heart - without thought, and without feeling in the heart. Do you not see all that the prophets, those authoritative ones from the past, have spoken? That it was necessary, right and proper for the Messiah to have suffered these things and then entered into his glory."

And then he began to unfold for them those prophets, interpreting scriptures. But still they did not see him. Still they did not recognize him. They reached the village where they were going, and invited him to join them to stay the night. He went in, and sitting at the table he took bread, blessed it, and broke it, just as he had done on the hills in Galilee, just as he had done on the night he was betrayed.

And suddenly they recognized him, their eyes were open, in the same instant that he vanished from their sight.

And they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, opening scriptures to us as he did? "

You see, they could not see him as he really was, for they could only see what they imagined him to be, what a prophet should be, how God should be.

They do not see him as he really was for they could only see him as they had hoped he might have been.

He had become opaque to them again.

Their expectations for how the divine should have acted had blinded them to the experience of how the divine really works.

But then here is the mystery of the text, the mystery that gives us reason to hope yet today:

The fact that they could not see him did not prevent him from revealing himself to them, first through the scriptures, then through the breaking of the bread

The fact that they could not see Jesus did not prevent him from revealing himself to them.

But they saw him at precisely the moment that he disappeared from sight among them.

Their eyes were opened just as he became invisible.

They saw him at precisely the moment that he was not to be seen.

What does this mean?

They saw him not through their sight, not through their vision, not through knowledge, not through their minds.

They saw him in their hearts.

They saw him not in his body. They saw him first through the scriptures, then through the bread.

And suddenly they saw. And at precisely the moment they saw, he disappeared

He became visible to them not in his presence. He became visible to them only in his absence.

As long as they could see him, he was opaque. Only when they could not see him did he become transparent.

Only when they could see him, through something else, in the scriptures, in the bread, did he become visible to them, did he become transparent to who he truly was – and is.

Only when they could see him in something else, only when they could see him in someone else, in the poor, in each other, in the community that gathered around scriptures and at the table, did he become visible to them once again, could they see him for what he really was.

Not in his body that was crucified and had risen, but in the body that had within it a heart that had burned.

They saw him not by seeing him with their eyes.

They saw him in their hearts, by faith.

And only when they realized that their hearts had truly burned within them could they know for sure that it was him

This same Jesus is still walking with us on the road to Emmaus that our lives are on today.

He still walks through our walls, showing up unannounced and when we least expect him.

He is still getting up out of the tombs of doctrines and dogma in which we continuously try to confine him, to lay him down, to keep him in the grave today.

He gets up, but he does not leave us alone.

He comes along side of us on the road, but the only way we can recognize him is when our hearts are truly burning within us.

The burning in the heart for another, for others – that is how we see Jesus on the road to Emmaus, that is how we see God in our lives and in our world

There is an often-told story of a monastery that had fallen upon difficult times. The monks were at odds with one another and the overall spirit of the place was in despair. The abbot one day was walking along a road in the woods when he came upon the local rabbi, walking through the woods as well.

The two spiritual leaders began talking. The abbot poured out his heart. The rabbi listened for a bit, then finally said:

“I have no advice to give you. But it is strange to hear that things are so bad, for I had heard that the Messiah is one of you.”

The abbot went home and was pondering the rabbi’s words. Finally he told one of the monks what had happened. “The rabbi said that he had heard that the Messiah was one of us. Could that be?”

The one monk told another what the abbot had told him that the rabbi had said. They wondered, could it be? And if so, who was it? One brother began to wonder if another brother was the Messiah. He began to treat him better, just in case. Pretty soon the spirit of the place began to change as the monks began to care for one another and show each other such respect, doing so because he wondered if this other could in fact be the messiah.

People from the village began to hear about the change. Soon they were coming to the monastery to be with the monks, to have them pray for them, to have them care for them. The people brought gifts and soon the monastery began to prosper again. Younger monks joined the order and the monastery became a vibrant center of spiritual light radiating throughout the village and across the countryside.

**Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims**  
**Sermon 4/6/08**

All because of the gift of the rabbi, who had told the abbot that he had heard the Messiah was one of them.

People of Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, I have heard that the Messiah is one of you.

Could it be?

Amen.

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