



“Burning Hearts, Opened Minds”

Luke 24:13-35

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Third Sunday of Easter

Several years ago, Gloria and I, along with three members from our church in Minneapolis, traveled to East Africa to visit a number of ministries we'd started or were supporting. One of those ministries was a school for training ministers in the central Kenyan city of Kitale. The school was started and directed by Deb and Gregg Snell who were members of our congregation.

Pastoral training is critical in modern Africa. Christianity is spreading so fast, leadership training cannot keep up. Most African pastors have no theological education and have secular jobs to support themselves and their families. Residential schools, the conventional training method, are not culturally appropriate in a patriarchal, tribal culture. Young men, and most Kenyan pastors are young men, are not accepted back home in villages run by tribal and village elders.

The school in Kitale is an alternative model. Students come to the school for two and three week-long courses several times a year and, after three to five years, receive an accredited degree. The school is thriving and making a large difference in Kenya.

After a brief tour of the campus, Gregg and Deb introduced us to their pastor whose church is vibrant and growing and who is also a graduate of the school. He eagerly and passionately told us his story and how the school had enriched his life and transformed his ministry.

He concluded his report by thanking our congregation for our support and for sending Deb and Gregg to Kenya. Then he told how Deb had been giving him the printed sermons of the minister of our church and how much the sermons were part of his pastoral formation. Apparently he hadn't made the connection between the name on the sermons and my name during the introductions.

As we smiled, he kept raving about the sermons. In fact, he went on, he was so impressed by a sermon on stewardship that he preached it word for word to his congregation. It worked, he said. Giving tripled in the next months. I was quite glad to hear that, since it had made no difference back in our church.

About then, Deb interrupted, "He's in the room," she said, and pointed at me. There was a long pause as this news sunk in. Then the sudden burst of recognition, surprise and, shock. He looked at me again, laughed loudly and said, "I thought you'd be bigger! You preach big!" We laughed then, and the memory of it still makes me laugh.

That experience: failure to recognize someone in full view and then the sudden revelation is a standard theme in art and literature. It's a form of irony in which the reader/observer knows what is going on but is forced to wait until the protagonist finally gets it. Irony well

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done is a revelatory experience. I suppose that's why the Bible has many stories that feature failure to recognize the divine right in front of our eyes, followed by sudden recognition and response.

The Gospel Lesson in Luke is a classic recognition story. Luke is the best storyteller in the New Testament, and he is at his best in this story. With wonderful craft and beauty, Luke tells us about disciples of Christ who didn't see him when was right in front of them.

The story begins with a sudden shift of scene from Easter morning to Easter afternoon. Early that morning the women found the tomb empty and heard the rumor he was risen from the dead. Peter ran to the tomb and found it empty, but still most of the disciples thought the rumor was just that – an idle old wives' tale. Peter was amazed by it all.

The scene shifts to Easter afternoon outside Jerusalem. Two of those puzzled disciples, Cleopas and his companion, perhaps his spouse, were on their way home to Emmaus, a village a couple of hours northeast of the city. Sad and dejected, they walked slowly remembering the blur of events that ended in Jesus' death.

A stranger came alongside them and joined their sad journey. Now we, the hearers of the story, know the stranger is Jesus. But they didn't recognize him – a recurring theme in the Easter stories. The only question is when they will recognize him. That irony moves the story along.

"What are you talking about," the stranger said. Cleopas answered, "Are you the only person in Jerusalem who doesn't know about the big news of the weekend?" Jesus plays along, "What news?" he said.

"Well," Cleopas began, "the news about Jesus of Nazareth. He was a prophet from God who spoke the word of God and did wonderful and powerful acts of God. God was with him but to our dismay, he was condemned by the powers-that-be and executed last Friday. We had hoped he was the one who would establish the reign of God on earth. But now it's the third day since he died."

Jesus sighed to himself and became the teacher one more time, "Oh you foolish and slow disciples, don't you know that suffering precedes the glory of the kingdom of God and is necessary to redeem the world?" Then he turned the walk into a small group Bible study and taught them the Scripture about the character of God's kingdom on earth. The disciples listened as they walked along, intrigued by this teacher and fascinated by his teaching. They were charmed by him, looked right at him, and missed him entirely – it's a human tendency.

As they approached Emmaus and home, Jesus walked on ahead of them pretending he was going a bit farther. "Stop," they said, "it's late, stay the night with us." Luke says they "urged" him to stay, implying he resisted. It's part of Near Eastern hospitality ritual to refuse the first invitation. We've all done it, "Oh no, I can't impose on you." But Cleopas pressed, and Jesus finally accepted the invitation. He went home with his vision-impaired disciples.

When dinner was ready, they sat down to eat. Suddenly the story shifts dramatically. The guest became the host. With words they'd heard so many times, in gestures near and dear to their hearts, words and gestures repeated at every Communion service in the history of the Christian church, "Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them." The gesture of hospitality offered to Jesus Christ is met with the hospitality of God at the table of the Lord.

At the sight of the familiar gestures and the hearing of the familiar words, there was a sudden rush of recognition. They recognized Jesus, and then he was gone. The Risen One is not always recognized, is always illusive and mysterious, but he always invites us to his table and reveals himself there.

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The two disciples made a dramatic U-turn and headed through the darkness back to Jerusalem to see the others. They arrived in the middle of the first Sunday evening church service. The group of disciples was astir and excited. It seems Jesus showed up there too. The disciples from Emmaus bore witness to their encounter with the Risen One and told how he'd been revealed to them in the breaking of the bread.

Luke is likely telling two stories simultaneously. He's telling an Easter story, but he's also telling the story of his church and our church too.

Easter is an experience repeated over and over, and an encounter with the Risen One is accessible to all. However, the ordinary means of human investigation and decision-making are not adequate means for the Easter experience. It's easy to look straight at Jesus Christ and miss him altogether.

We didn't know it, but this Gospel story was a favorite of my recently deceased father-in-law, Gene. In the last days of his life, Gloria and her mom brought him home from the nursing home for the afternoon. He sat in a chair looking out at his beloved woods and lake with his Bible in his lap and his dog by his side.

He asked Gloria, "What is the story about burning hearts and Jesus?" Gloria called me and I told her Luke 24. With moist eyes he read the old story one more time and, I suspect, his heart burned within him one more time. The story of Jesus, his word, does that.

It's a familiar experience. As Cleopas and spouse hurried back to Jerusalem they remembered their strange trip in the other direction. "Remember when he opened the Scripture? Remember how our hearts burned within us?" They were experiencing the Risen One in the hearing of Scripture. Week after week, the church gathers on the first day of the week and opens the Scripture, listens to the ancient stories and, week after week, we hear the voice of Jesus and, if we are paying attention, our hearts are warmed by the experience. The question is whether we offer hospitality to the Word heard and proclaimed. A closed heart cannot hear, and a rigid mind will not hear.

And, of course, they recognized him in the breaking of the bread. It's an obvious reference to Holy Communion where Christ opens God's table to all who come. An ordinary meal is made holy by the presence of the Risen One who comes to feed us every time. The only question is whether we're equally hospitable and welcome our host into our lives.

Christ is known and experienced in the hospitable community by warm hearted, open minded hospitable people who hear the word and come to Christ's table. Word and sacrament are the primary means of Christian nurture and are how we see the Christ standing right in front of us.

I suspect that is what J.R.R. Tolkien was trying to tell us in his classic, *The Hobbit*. The hero of Tolkien's famous book is an unlikely character named Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit, a strange race of creatures who, as a lot, are sleepy and sedentary folks not given to heroics or adventures.

Bilbo Baggins is an even more unlikely hero than most Hobbits. He is of mixed blood. One side of his family carried the blood of the Took, a swashbuckling and adventurous people. Bilbo, dominated by the Hobbit side of the family, seldom if ever thought about his Tookish heritage.

That is, until Gandalf the magician said to him, "Bilbo Baggins, there is more to you than you know." Gandalf had come to visit Bilbo bringing a dozen dwarfs with him. After feeding his strange guests, Bilbo plopped in front of a roaring fire in the fireplace while the dwarfs began to sing an ancient song.

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As Bilbo listened, something “Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, hear the pine trees and waterfalls and explore caves and wear a sword instead of a walking stick.”

Like Bilbo Baggins, we have a similar mixed lineage that includes an ancient divine image. More often than not the human side overpowers the divine, and we live dull, ordinary, very human lives. Souls shrunken to human shape, we simply cannot see the divine side of life or ourselves. God says, “There is more to you than you know.”

The risen Christ is known and experienced in living communities of disciples where the word is opened, heard, and proclaimed, and where a table is set and the Lord invites any and all to come to meet him.

There is more to us than we know. Deep in us is the capacity to know things beyond ourselves, to experience eternity here and now.

Here in this place we catch glimpses of eternity in ancient and new songs of faith. Our hearts are warmed and our minds opened when the word is opened and proclaimed and experienced. And at this table – and in the coffee hour where the service continues – our hearts are strangely warmed and our minds wonderfully opened by a faith experience that shapes us in the form of eternity.

Amen.

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