

And Their Eyes Were Opened

Luke 24:13-35

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I love all of the Easter stories the Gospel writers have given us. Each one invites us into the mystery of faith. In most of the stories, there are elements of shock and disbelief. In one story, Mary mistakes the risen Christ for the gardener. It's only when he speaks to her that she recognizes his voice and her eyes are opened and she knows that Christ is risen. In another, the disciples are out fishing and haven't caught one fish all night. In the morning, they see a stranger on the shore, but they don't recognize him until their nets mysteriously fill up with a catch like they've never seen before. Their eyes are opened and they know Christ is risen.

In Luke's account, it's Easter afternoon. Two of the disciples are walking along dejectedly, assuming that Jesus didn't turn out to be the Messiah after all. They had heard a report that some women had found the tomb empty and had heard the voice of angels saying he had risen, but they didn't really believe the report. They walked along the road heading back home, a picture of discouragement. Can you see them? Their chins are down on their chests. Their hands are shoved into their pockets. They are commiserating over what they perceive to have been a tragic ending to a great hopefulness. Their faces looked like mine did on the day of high school graduation and I opened the diploma to discover it had not been signed!

A stranger joined them as they walked along. Luke says their eyes were kept from recognizing him. They heard his voice, they watched his gait, they listened to his stories, but their eyes were kept from recognizing the risen Christ.

This becomes a basic question for the modern believer, the modern disciple. What is it that keeps any of us from recognizing Christ's presence? Could it be that we have a too narrow definition of the risen Christ's appearance? An anonymous writer from the 15th century states:

Thou shalt know him when he comes,
Not by any din of drums –
Nor the vantage of his airs –
Nor by anything he wears –
Neither by his crown,
nor his gown.
For his presence known shall be
by the Holy Harmony
That his coming makes in thee.

It's a good question: what prevents me from recognizing the Risen Christ in you, or in anyone? What I know for sure is that Christ is risen. What confounds me is why I sometimes fail to recognize the Presence.

The two discouraged disciples and the stranger continue along the road. When they reach Emmaus, it is late in the day; the sun is setting. The stranger appears to be going further. So the two invite the one to stay for dinner, a fine gesture of hospitality. Still without a clue as to the identity of their traveling companion, the disciples put some groceries out on the table. Before they can tuck their napkins into their belts, the stranger takes the loaf of bread, holds it up as he had on so many previous occasions of table fellowship, offered the common blessing, and broke the bread for the three to share. It is in this simple table ritual of breaking the bread that the eyes of the two are opened and they see that their guest is the Christ, now risen from the tomb, alive to them right in their own home. Their eyes are opened! Alleluia! It becomes for them, finally, an Easter Day!

So, the question for the modern seeker is this: what has to happen in order for me to see what I had not seen before? Do I need a new pair of glasses, the 3D kind? Do I need cataract surgery? Do I need some kind of a dream? A religious awakening? A lightning bolt from the heavens?

I can only tell you what it was that I needed, what it was that I needed to do in order to see the risen Christ where I had not seen him before. **I needed to stop judging.** I needed to stop judging people who did things I didn't like. You remember that place in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, 'judge not that ye be not judged?' Well, evidently, he meant it! A loving friend placed a hand on my shoulder and asked me when I would stop judging. He had named the cause of my blindness. And then, it was as if scales fell off my eyeballs. I took my judgmental attitude off and hung it in the closet with some old sweaters that don't fit any more, and locked the closet door, and threw away the key. That is when I began to recognize the presence of Christ in all the people around me.

So, when I think about feasting at the Emmaus road table, as we will do in a few moments, I think about eating bread that will give me a spiritual strength to resist the temptation to sit in judgment of anyone other than myself. I know that Easter begins early in the morning, at dawn, but it becomes real when we let go of the judging and see those on our right and those on our left as our brothers and our sisters. And that really is what I wanted to say to the church on this Easter Sunday, in the greatest of hope. Amen!