

Recognition and God's Bad Timing
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April 23, 2023 – Easter 3A
Luke 24:13-35

This set of readings makes me feel a little bit like we're in the midst of a repetitive TV show. The overarching themes of disbelief and joy we first heard on Easter Day are still there, in spades. While the gospel readings for last Sunday and today come from vastly different sources, they have similar shapes. Luke's unique telling of the story of Cleopas and an unnamed friend meeting Jesus on the road, and John's unique telling of the story of how Doubting Thomas came to believe both feature disciples who had difficulty recognizing the risen Christ are given the tools and experience they need to be able to believe. They start with a resurrected Jesus who seems to appear and disappear at will. Both end with all of the big Easter feelings of disappointment, disbelief, bewilderment, hope and joy.

One thing Luke in particular drives home is just how bad God's sense of timing is, by human standards, when it comes to revealing Godself. It is a well-established fact that God – and Jesus – show up when and how they choose. It's definitely the case here, as Cleopas and his friend are prevented from recognizing Jesus until the exact moment they are meant to. It prompted me to ask a couple of questions: What if they'd recognized Jesus right away? Or if he'd said "Greetings!" to them, the same as he'd done to the women who came to the tomb earlier that morning?

The story just wouldn't be the same, for a couple of reasons. First, an early "reveal" would have defeated Luke's purpose of rooting Jesus and his death and resurrection firmly within the relationship between God and God's people which is described in the Hebrew Scriptures. Second, it would also mean that Cleopas, his

friend, and every other Christian since missed the chance to recognize the resurrected Christ in the breaking of bread. He'd hinted that it would happen in the first place over dinner just a few days earlier, when he'd broken a loaf and proclaimed, "this is my body." It is a sign of the fulfillment of a promise. It is also the origin of the practice of gathering around a table to break bread together in remembrance of him – a practice which has defined the Christian community since the very beginning.

Before we get to that pivotal moment, we get to experience once again Luke's penchant for making characters have experiences of the divine while traveling shows up in spades. Cleopas and his unnamed companion are walking somewhere along the way between Jerusalem and the town of Emmaus when Jesus shows up out of nowhere and begins to eavesdrop on them. Jesus' curiosity about what he overhears – "What things?" - is rewarded with the equivalent of, "How did you possibly miss that? It was all over the news! My phone was blowing up with all the notifications and text messages!"

Jesus meets the retelling of the previous week's events, including Cleopas' disappointment that Jesus didn't seem to have been the one to redeem Israel after all, with a "well, did you know..." speech for the ages. "Jesus whips out his pocket Torah scrolls, complete with the Prophets, and gives a multipointed lecture on messianic completion; his PowerPoint is affectively vapid... [This is] a well-told story also serves as a window from which we can look back into history and draw strength to imagine and move into the future. Jesus shows his connection to the faith tradition of the past. The two travelers on the road, the disciples left in Jerusalem, and other readers to come –

they and we are connected not only to a tradition, but also to a hope that yearns for fruition. It is a history of *kairos*" – God's time – "not clocks and calendars."¹

They don't recognize Jesus until the exact moment they're supposed to – in God's timeframe, not theirs or ours. Luke doesn't tell us why; it just is, because God wants it that way. Cleopas and his friend may well have had their vision blocked initially thanks to their needs for certainty. They only see what they want to see when Jesus starts walking with them. He's just another guy walking on the road, who seems to possess an incredible understanding of exactly what happened in the past few days, at least from a theological perspective. Setting aside the challenges to our Jewish siblings that stem from Luke's interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures here, what this is meant to do is remind us that Jesus's life and death didn't happen in a vacuum. He's part of the long history of God intervening on behalf of God's people – and it's all right there, if we're able to take it in.

Cleopas and his friend may also be blinded by their own disbelief about what the women had told them. The Greek word Luke uses to describe the "idle tale" the women told to Peter and the rest when they return from the empty tomb, *leros*, connotes something that's absolute garbage – as in, "the women who told us this are out of their minds."² It sure sounds like something we might call fake news at first hearing. It just plain does not make sense. Dead people don't just spring back to life, and angels don't customarily show up to announce it. None of it seems right, so the deliverers of the

¹ Shannon Michael Pater, "Pastoral Perspective: Luke 24:13-35." In *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2 (Lent through Eastertide)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 422.

² David Lose, "Easter 3B: Resurrection Doubts." <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/04/easter-3-b-resurrection-doubts> [accessed April 17, 2023].

news have to be just a bit off their rockers, or high, or drunk – anything but rational. To someone living in the Greek-speaking ancient world, seeing literally is believing. Cleopas and his friend don't believe it – so they can't see it, even when it's right in front of them.

Both Cleopas and his unnamed traveling companion lacked the capacity for belief until that *kairos* moment of seeing Jesus break the loaf of bread at the dinner they invited him to share. In hindsight, it shows them that they might need to start over from the beginning.³ Trying to match our own senses of timing up with God's not a new or unique challenge. We all can tell stories about God throwing monkey wrenches into our plans at just the right – or wrong, by human standards – time, and how the outcome somehow recast everything we thought we knew in a whole new light.

Being open to those monkey wrenches, particularly the ones which are designed to help us recognize the presence of God and God's Christ as manifest in others, still presents a massive challenge. That we still struggle mightily to do it is one of the reasons why, for example, there were multiple incidents of young people being shot because they'd taken a turn into the wrong yard, just this past week. It's why we as a society continue to struggle with things like racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism: we are expressly taught to see difference, to label those who don't look or think or have similar economic advantages as we do as "bad" or "less than." And then, we are invited to continue to participate in a system which wants very much to keep it that way. Like Cleopas, we are asked to see and to know differently, and to trust that the person sitting across from us contains the scarred hands and side of the resurrected Christ just as

³ Chelsey Harmon, "Sermon Commentary for Sunday, April 23, 2023: Luke 24:13-35 Commentary." <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-04-17/luke-2413-35/> [accessed April 17, 2023].

much as we do. It's hard – I know, because I have tried, and failed at it, and occasionally in spectacular fashion. And I've struggled to find the courage to try to engage with them and their stories again, mainly because the bubbles I've lived and worked in for most of my life want to lie to me by insisting that it isn't my problem. That is, until, say, another Black person is pulled out of their car for no reason and murdered by police, or another school shooting happens, and we're forced to have the same conversations that end in the same shrugs and cause the same harm to those on the receiving end of these hateful and violent acts.

What if we did something else instead? What if we actually listened, the way Cleopas did, without an agenda, or giving in to the need to respond in such a way as to make it about ourselves? Could we actually allow ourselves to pay attention to our burning hearts, and be moved to get up and actually do something which showed that we, too, saw and heard the risen Christ, and believed?