

Sermon: Emmaus  
New North Church, Hingham  
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18 April 2021

Based on **1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:13-48**

On Bob Dylan's *Modern Times* album, released in 2006, a song called *Spirit on the Water* has a lyric that goes like this: "Have you ever seen a ghost? | No – but you have heard of them."

That song came to mind while reading this week's post-Resurrection story from Luke about what happened on the road to Emmaus. Notice that this story includes the same characters as last week's story from John, and if we think about it, both stories fit together quite plausibly.

But Luke's story raises a number of questions. Why were these two disciples leaving Jerusalem? Why do they not recognize Jesus during their conversation on the road? Why do they only recognize him in the breaking of the bread? And why, once they do recognize him, does he then vanish from their sight?

We heard last week that the disciples had locked themselves away in fear for their lives. These two disciples heading to Emmaus were probably experiencing all the same emotions as the disciples in John's story: shock, grief, confusion, disappointment maybe. Emmaus is just down the road from Jerusalem, only a few miles away, an easy walk. So, it makes sense that they figured it might be better to get out of town for a while.

But then they bumped into Jesus himself and did not recognize him. Luke tells us it was because their eyes 'were *held* not to recognize him.' Held by whom? By God, we think. Their inability to recognize Jesus could be because of their limited or distorted understanding about Jesus, even now, after all they have seen and heard.

On the one hand, they say he was a prophet mighty in deed and word. But on the other hand, they were disappointed that he was not the Messiah who would redeem Israel. In the longer ending of Mark's Gospel (16:12), 'in glory' means 'in another form,' and it might mean the same thing here for Luke. As long as the disciples' concept of Jesus is unclear, they are unable to see him in his glory. He is unrecognizable in another form.

There is a theme in Luke's Gospel of gradual conversion, reintegration, and reconciliation, especially in his meal stories. Today's story is another example of this. These two disciples move from disappointment to humility; from sadness and despair to joy; from blindness to vision<sup>1</sup>. In the end, Jesus turns them into true believers. And when they reunite with their fellow disciples, they are on fire with the revelation of the risen Lord.

What happened that turned them around?

Two things: Word and sacrament.

While Jesus was initially concealed to them on the road, he began to interpret to them 'the things *about himself*' in Scripture. You would think that, since he's been doing this with them for the past few years, it would seem familiar. But here, he corrects their conceptions of a suffering Messiah through Scripture, revealing himself to them.

The liturgy we use for Communion often comes from Luke, who described how, at the Last Supper, Jesus gave thanks to God, broke the bread, and passed it all around to everyone at the Table. When he does the same thing here, the disciples' eyes were opened – we can imagine that what he did here caused them to recall Jesus saying, "Do this in remembrance of me" only a few days ago, and it rang a bell for them.

Luke is trying to convey to us that we experience the living Christ in Word and sacrament; through interpreting and understanding Scripture and in the breaking of the bread; through proclaiming the Gospel and in celebrating the sacrament. Fred Craddock, a preacher, scholar, and writer, said "[Jesus'] presence at the table makes all believers first-generation Christians and every meeting place Emmaus."<sup>2</sup>

So, why did Jesus vanish from their sight?

Unlike Adam and Eve, who received knowledge in the wrong way, at the wrong time, and from the wrong source, the disciples receive it from the very hand of the Lord.<sup>3</sup> Their eyes are opened to recognize the glory of Jesus Christ, but they can't sustain it, like Peter walking on water, so the risen Christ, although present, becomes invisible to them.

It feels good to think of us all as first-generation Christians. We can easily imagine gathering at our Communion table as meeting in Emmaus. But how do we recognize the presence of Jesus in our lives in the midst of a chaotic world, or when things don't turn out the way we expect them to?

When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he proclaimed, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)!” Now, at the end of the story, we see Jesus’ disciples filled with doubt and fear and a loss of faith.

Jesus knew the disciples were frightened; he knew they had doubts. In a sense, they were all Doubting Thomases, and maybe so are we.

Luke reported that the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost when Jesus stood among them. As Dylan said, they’d heard of them but hadn’t actually seen any, and thus were unsure. It’s no different for us – I’m sure we would prefer to see Jesus standing among us too.

But Jesus set their minds at ease. He showed them his hands and feet; he even took a piece of broiled fish and ate it in their presence. Ghosts don’t eat, you see.

In his glory, Jesus recalibrates our expectations, reminds us that we’re not alone, that there is always hope, and he ignites our faith. Luke tells us that, in our life journey as individuals and as a faith community, we will come to recognize the presence of Jesus in Word, sacrament, and witness.

Even if we can’t see him, Jesus is present and at work in our lives.

The world is a messed-up place, but God is always ready to offer peace and forgiveness. John wrote, ‘when he is revealed, we will be like him.’ He is revealed when we feed the hungry, give the thirsty drink, welcome the stranger. He is revealed to us and present to us and working through us in our words and actions.

What started out as a story of two disciples searching for meaning in the Crucifixion while on the road to Emmaus has now become a foundational faith story for generations of Christians, one that fully captures the joy of Easter.

May we, as disciples in this generation, stand and live joyfully in the light of Christ Jesus, as our faith call us.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Bucur, Bogdan G. “Blinded by Invisible Light: Revisiting the Emmaus Story (Luke 24,13-35).” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 90, no. 4 (December 2014): 685–707.

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 286-287.

<sup>3</sup> Bucur, 702.