

“Do We Recognize Jesus Today?”

Luke 24:13-35

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Dana’s father had a number of memorable experiences travelling around the world in his capacity as a tobacco executive, but perhaps the most fascinating was on a trip back from London to New York. He knew the woman who boarded the plane late from her limo must have been someone important, but he didn’t recognize her and just said a casual hello. Later they shared a bit of small talk, and at one point, he even gave her some unsolicited advice. She was doing needlework of some kind and Dana has done all sorts of needlework since she was very young. “I’ve watched my daughter doing that,” he said, “and I don’t think you’re doing the corners right.” The simple fact that Dan White had watched Dana that carefully doing needlework is amazing!

Anyway, just before they got to New York, the woman went into the restroom and put on some makeup. When she came out, he realized he had been talking to Grace Kelly! Now he couldn’t get out a word, but when she asked where he was from, he said he lived in Louisville, but was originally from a small town in Kentucky she had probably never heard of. She said the only small town she knew in Kentucky was Hopkinsville because she knew a playwright who was from there, Gant Gaither Jr. Dan told her that was his hometown and Gant Gaither, Sr. was the surgeon who took out his tonsils. She said she had a country ham sent to Monaco each Christmas from a store in Hop-town, as we call it, and Dan, of course, knew the grocer who sent it. It was an incredible experience. She invited him and the family to the palace but sadly, she died in the accident very soon after this flight.

Now, when Dan tells this story, the emphasis is on two things – how fascinating it was to meet Grace Kelly and how, despite all evidence to the contrary, Hopkinsville, Kentucky is actually the center of the universe. He has run into people all over the world with some link to Hop-town. But when I hear this story, all I can think is, “How

could you not recognize Grace Kelly?” She had retired from acting, she was a little older and we all look different without our make-up or hair done or whatever... but still, I would have recognized Grace Kelley! I’d like to think I would have recognized Grace Kelly.

We have a similar reaction to the familiar story we have read from Luke 24. Two disciples, one named Cleopas and the other unnamed, walk with Jesus for seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the day of resurrection. They talk with this man they view to be a stranger about many things, including what has happened to Jesus; that is, that he has died, and that some women in the group have astounded them with news of an empty tomb and an encounter with angels who say he is alive. Jesus even interprets scripture for them, saying that suffering was a necessary prelude to glory for the Messiah. But still they don’t recognize him! How could this be after all the time they have spent with him throughout his ministry? We would have recognized him! We’d like to think we would have recognized the Risen Christ.

Its déjà vu all over again. Mary Magdalene plays out this same dance with Jesus in the reading from John on Easter, not recognizing him, thinking he is the gardener. What is going on here? Does the resurrected Jesus look that different? In last week’s reading from John, Jesus refers to his wounds as still being visible. It doesn’t seem like he looks that different.

Is it simply a matter of being so consumed by grief that these followers of Jesus cannot see who is right before them? Grief does cloud our vision and alter many things. Earlier in the 24th chapter of Luke, the male disciples are said to dismiss the women’s report of an empty tomb as an “idle tale” in the NRSV or “nonsense” in the NIV. According to biblical scholar David Lyle Jeffrey (*Luke*, 283), the Greek here is a medical term which refers to the “delirious babblings of very sick persons.” The men think the women are delirious, but who is really delirious here? Perhaps everyone, but first and foremost the men! Perhaps that’s why Cleopas and his companion don’t recognize Jesus.

Or perhaps they don’t recognize him because Jesus or God is testing them. The text says that their eyes are “kept from recognizing him (24:16).” The Greek carries the sense of holding them back or

restraining them. Judging them here for blindness feels a bit like God hardening Pharaoh's heart and then punishing him for hardheartedness. If they are kept from seeing, how are they supposed to see?

Whatever the cause of their struggle to recognize Jesus, it certainly creates an intriguing sense of dramatic irony in the story. We know the stranger is Jesus, but they don't until they get to Emmaus and he breaks bread, like he has so many times before, but even then, we don't know that they would recognize him on their own, because Luke says, "their eyes were opened and they recognized him (24:31)." In other words, whoever or whatever prevented them from recognizing Jesus now allows them to see. And of course, as soon as they do, he vanishes!

So, what is going on here? Why can't they recognize Jesus? Wouldn't we? We would certainly like to think so. But maybe we are asking this question in the wrong tense. Rather than asking whether we would have recognized Jesus then, maybe we ought to ask whether we do so now. Do we recognize Jesus today? Do we see where the Christ is moving among us? Do we hear his voice speaking to us? Rather than judging disciples in another time and place for actions we may never understand, we might benefit from examining our own capacity to see.

For we do trust that Christ is with us always, even to the end of this age; he said as much. And we believe that the God who was in Christ guides and directs us through the work of the Holy Spirit. But do we recognize Christ and do we know when it is God who is speaking to us?

I have shared with some of you before a story about a young man who unsettled a Wednesday Night Supper in another setting. He had long hair and a beard and wore old, worn blue jeans. He just didn't fit in with the regular crowd and they figured he wanted something or was up to no good. So, several folks talked among themselves as to who might ask him to leave. Before any did, thankfully, one of them had the sense to ask the deacon chair if he knew the young man. "I sure do," he said, "He's my son." He had grown up in the church, but gone away to college and changed his appearance. Once the people got this clue, they realized it was him, but they did not recognize him at first.

So, it often goes with our efforts to identify where Christ is present with us today. Christ is everywhere, including at work in our hearts and

lives, but often Christ is present in the very place we least imagine him, though we should, if we have paid any attention at all to his life and ministry. He spends most of his time with the poor and outcast, with some leaders of the community as well, but often those others avoid, those with questionable reputations like tax collectors. Where would Christ be today if not at the Raleigh Men's Shelter or the Helen Wright Center, our clothing ministry or Good Shepherd's lunch program, Moore Square on a Saturday morning or any given bar late on a Saturday night?

He has told us, has he not, in the parable of sheep and goats, that whenever we minister to the least of these in need, we minister to him. He is present in places of great need. But still we have such a difficult time believing this is so. In his book *Bread for the Wilderness, Wine for the Journey* (pp. 71-72), John Killinger includes this reflection of a minister from Oklahoma.

Lord, was that You I gave the dollar to last night? In the semi-darkness, was that You or Carlos Rodriguez, half-drunk with the suffering of this world?

Was that You asking for a quarter or a half-dollar to buy a taco? Was that You, so bruised and pitiable, who kept trying to convince me that your name was Carlos Rodriguez from Texas?

Haven't I met You like that before? If I have, it disturbs me that You go around in shadows dirty and half-drunk.

You know, don't You, that it is hard to recognize You in that condition? I guess I want You out of the shadows so I can see You more clearly. Do you really have to go so incognito in our world?

What's that, Lord? What are You saying about being hungry and thirsty? Oh!

So, where is Christ today? Among the people we seek to help while building Habitat houses and among the people we build them with; among the immigrants and refugees who are living in turmoil right now, including those being deported and those with the responsibility of deporting them; among communities across this nation struggling with

violence and drug issues as well as human trafficking, in addition to law enforcement personnel, counselors and mentors trying to help. Christ is present everywhere, but especially where there is great need.

But how do we know when it is Christ speaking to us? There is no magic formula for discernment, though if we take our clue from Cleopas and his friend, if our hearts burn within us, we might want to pay attention. But as Christ is often present in places we might not at first look, Christ often speaks to us in ways we might easily miss.

Often we hear the Divine voice speaking through the words of scripture, that's obvious enough, but it may not be in the Sunday School hour or in worship. Hearing the words and hearing what God is saying to us through them are two different things. Sometimes we need more time to reflect upon a text, verse or just one word.

But God speaks to us not just through scripture, but many other ways. During the retreat at Caswell last weekend, many of us heard the voice of Christ in a number of different ways – through the natural setting, the ocean and all the beauty around it; through the love and trust so palpably present and growing in our church; and through the voices of children who revealed incredible openness and shared amazing insights. Scripture does say that a little child shall lead them.

The bottom line is this – Christ speaks to us through all of life, through good times and bad, through experiences we plan and those we do not, through people and nature, joys and sorrows, through traditional worship like we experience this morning and alternative forms like we experience in Vespers Services, this evening with the aid of jazz. God in Christ is always speaking to us and for us. The key is that we are willing to listen, which brings us back to our friends on the road to Emmaus.

They don't recognize Jesus until their eyes are opened. I don't know that anyone keeps us from recognizing Jesus or hearing his voice, though there are experiences in life that can cloud our judgment, but we do need help at times with hearing and seeing.

One form of help can be found in habits of spiritual discipline, like *lectio divina*, meditation, journaling or walking the labyrinth. Through these habits and many others, we not only look and listen in a different way; we train our eyes and ears to see and hear in other places.

One of my mentors, Glenn Hinson, describes his grandmother's habit of reading scripture on her porch while sitting in a rocking chair. She would read slowly and reflect on the words, and sometimes as she paused, tears would stream down her face in response to a single verse, word or image. Hearing God's voice, even through scripture, takes focus and work, like anything else worthwhile in life.

Another form of help can come in the support and guidance of fellow believers. This help can vary from informal listening by a friend, counseling by a minister or guidance from a spiritual director. But there are times when all need help in making sense of where we are.

We may think Christ is calling us to new work or to make a change in our lives, or we may be struggling to hear Christ's voice at all, but wherever we are, we need a sounding board, someone to hear our perspective, offer feedback and ask good questions. No one can make decisions for us, but as with most things in life, there are times when it helps us on our spiritual journey to have other eyes and ears involved.

One other source of help in our discernment is found in God. If we want to see where Christ is at work in our lives and in the world around us, we can ask God for help in seeing. And if we want to hear Christ's word for our lives, we can ask Christ for help in hearing. The key is openness, genuine openness, which includes a willingness to see and hear things that do not square with our expectations.

Luke Skywalker doesn't recognize Yoda when he meets him in *The Empire Strikes Back* because he doesn't match his expectations. Many first-century Jews do not recognize Jesus as Messiah because he doesn't match their expectations. We struggle to see him today and to hear what he has to say about things like welcoming the stranger and not worshiping money, forgiving those who hurt us and trusting God, because he doesn't match our expectations. But if we are willing to try, open to see and hear what we don't think can be, perhaps don't even want to be, the God who was in Christ can open our eyes and ears.

My father-in-law wanted me to note that he didn't recognize Grace Kelly *at first*. Eventually he did. So it often goes with our recognition and discernment. The key is that we eventually see Christ and hear God's voice no matter how long it takes us to do so.