

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 1: 17-23; Luke 24: 13-35
Olivet Church, April 30, 2017

Stay with Us Because the Day is now Nearly Over

Recently my wife and I were hiking in the late afternoon at Mint Springs Park above Crozet. At one point I saw a Barred owl glide through the forest and land in a tree. As we continued down the trail I found him perched on a branch not too far away and trained my binoculars on him. I passed the binoculars to Charlotte and described the owl's location. She was unable to find it. I tried to give the location of the owl relative the trees around it. Still no luck. I stood directly behind her, trained the binoculars on the owl and passed them over her head. She still couldn't see it. I made sure she had the right tree, told her to go up to the third branch and to look for the owl less than a foot from the trunk. A few moments passed as she stared through the binoculars. All of a sudden she screamed, "O my gosh, I see him. I've been looking right at him but had no idea he was that big!" Trying to find a smaller bird she had been looking at the owl the whole time and yet was unable to see him.

The disciples' inability to recognize Jesus involved a similar disconnect between expectations and reality. In John's gospel we have Mary mistaking Jesus for a gardener in the cemetery until he calls her name. It a little easier to understand Mary's confusion in the early morning twilight hours and the mental and emotional whiplash of finding the tomb empty and being addressed by an angel. But the travelers to Emmaus encounter Jesus in broad daylight and actually stop to look at him when sadly describing the things that had happened recently in Jerusalem.

Their difficulty is clearly one of disappointment with God, unrealized and mistaken expectations of the Messiah. They were walking along besides, even staring into the face of Jesus the Messiah, and yet they did not recognize him. Which actually turns out not be that unusual. If God is indeed present and active in the world; if Christ is indeed identified with the least of these such that we serve him when we minister to those who are hungry, imprisoned, naked, and sick; than many, many people fail to recognize the risen, living Lord present and active in the world and in their lives.

The good news of the gospel narratives is that this slowness to recognize and believe in the risen Christ was a common experience of his closest friends and followers. While the four gospels have many interesting variations in their accounts of Jesus' resurrection, they are absolutely consistent on one thing: no one, including Jesus' own disciples, believes the good news of Jesus' resurrection when they first hear it. And it's not just the testimony from the women that they disbelieve and consider to be an idle tale; it's even the risen Jesus. By the end of Luke's account, the disciples have heard the women's testimony, Peter has raced to the tomb and confirmed that it's empty, our two disciples on the road to Emmaus are encountered by Jesus and then return to tell their tale to find that Jesus has appeared to Simon Peter, and then Jesus himself appears among them and invites them to touch him to dispel any doubts. And then Luke writes, "while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering...!"

What does it take to see the risen Christ, to believe that Jesus, "born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, and buried, descended to hell; on the third day rose again?"

Why is it that some believe, and others do not? What enables belief in, and recognition of the risen Christ? In the gospel narratives, Simon Peter responds to Jesus' question about who his disciples thought he was by saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of God." And Jesus said, "Blessed are you, but flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven." Last week I shared the statement of faith from the Heidelberg Catechism about "true faith being not only a certain knowledge but a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in us through the gospel." Martin Luther explained it well in his third article of the Apostles' Creed in his Small Catechism. There, he says, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Luke's gospel ends with Jesus, "opening the minds of his followers, to understand the scriptures, and then he said to them, "thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead, and then repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations."

Yet we are not resigned to fate as to whether the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and minds, enabling faith and recognition of the risen, living Lord in our lives and our world. We can pray, seeking the gift of faith that comes from the work of God's Spirit. I love the prayerful words of the old Fanny Crosby hymn, "Pass me Not:"

Pass me not, O gentle Savior, hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling, do not pass me by.
Savior, Savior, Hear my humble cry,
While on others Thou art calling, do not pass me by.

Let me at Thy throne of mercy find a sweet relief;
Kneeling there in deep contrition, help my unbelief.
Trusting only in Thy merit, would I seek Thy face;
Heal my wounded, broken spirit, save me by Thy grace.

In addition there are practices, spiritual disciplines by which we do not generate faith and righteousness, but open ourselves up and place ourselves in a position where the Spirit can work on us, enabling faith, encouraging discipleship, transforming our lives. The story of Cleopas and his companion and their journey to Emmaus lifts up four of these practices.

The first is reflection on the events and activities of the day, seeking to connect the dots, figure out where God is present, and what God is up to. The searching arises from a longing and from a hope for this life and world amidst the lack of fulfillment, the brokenness, the suffering and injustice we see or experience.

"But we had hoped..." the Emmaus travelers say. So much is said in those four words, as they speak of a future that is not to be, an expectation that created enthusiasm but did not materialize, a promise that created faith that proved to be false. They are heartbreaking words that we all too often gloss over, dismiss, or move by too quickly toward some kind of resolution, fleeing the cross-like experiences of life for the promise of resurrection. A friend shares the news of a death of his sister, and we sympathize for a moment before changing the topic. Or a colleague shares her disappointment at not getting a promotion, and we remind her that at least she has a job. Or we see an acquaintance we know has just gone through a dreadful loss, and we avoid him or her

altogether because we just don't know what to say. We don't mean to be callous or insensitive, we just feel inadequate to the task of confronting the darkness of our lives and this world and so flee to the light in denial.

But just as before there is resurrection there is cross, so in today's gospel reading, before there are burning hearts there are broken ones. We and the Emmaus travelers need to be allowed to grieve a future that will never be in order that they may possibly recognize and receive the future God has prepared. The first spiritual practice that enabled Jesus to be revealed to these two despairing disciples is reflection on their lives and where they have sensed God's presence, and painfully felt God to be absent.

The second practice involves discussing and reflecting on Holy Scripture. And this Bible study, with Jesus present, as we believe he is "whenever two or three are gathered," is not about knowledge so much as it is about faith; about discerning the presence and promises of God in the Scriptures so that we might better discern, trust in, and respond to the presence of God in the events of our lives and the world. Would that participants in Christian education classes and Bible studies would leave those gatherings saying, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he opened the scriptures to us?"

The third practice is that of service, extending hospitality to the stranger. The Emmaus travelers concretely expressed their love of neighbor by providing food and lodging. The lesson of scripture and the lives of the saints through the ages is that as we draw closer to our neighbors in love, we draw closer to God. And likewise, as we draw closer to God we draw closer to our neighbors --- even and perhaps especially to neighbors who are different, who we fear, who we may even consider enemies; but in God's love are actually our brothers and sisters. The wisdom of Proverbs lifts up the experience of God's people, "in extending hospitality to strangers and entertaining angels unaware." This truth is demonstrated in Jesus' parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25: "in as much as you did it unto one of the least of these that are thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison you did it unto me."

The fourth practice is that of corporate worship. Christian worship, which includes prayer, song, hearing and reflecting on God's word, Christian community, acts of dedication, and sacrament. It was in the blessing, breaking, and distribution of the bread that their eyes were finally opened and they recognized the risen Christ in their midst. Worship is the place where Jesus continues to reveal himself. That is where the faith of all is awakened, nurtured, sustained, and strengthened.