

Sermon on the Road to Emmaus, April 23, 2023

I think this is one of my favourite Easter stories. Jesus has been arrested and killed and his disciples are in a mess. They are really sad because they love Jesus. They are really confused because they thought he would sweep the Romans into the sea and free Israel and instead the Romans have killed him. They are disappointed. They wanted him to get rid of the Romans and now he isn't going to. All their hopes are dashed to the ground. Everything they've worked for since they started following Jesus seems pretty pointless. And some of their women now seem to have lost their minds and are talking about visions of angels saying Jesus was risen. And they're afraid the Romans might round them up next. Some of them are hiding out in Jerusalem behind locked doors. Cleopas and his companion, probably his wife Mary, decide there is nothing left for them here and they head home to Emmaus.

As they are walking along, someone overtakes them and says hello. He asks them what they were talking about. They tell him all about it and he starts explaining how the Scriptures actually foretold this and it had to happen this way. They have no idea who this person is, but they are hanging on his words, with some hope starting to burn again in their hearts. He seems to be planning to keep walking when they get to Emmaus, but they beg him to stay with them, so he goes in. And at dinner, he picks up the bread, gives thanks, breaks it and gives it to them and in that moment they recognise him: it's Jesus! And then he's gone. And they jump up and rush back to Jerusalem to tell the others the good news: Jesus is risen! Jesus is alive!

There's lots of stuff here for us. Do you notice in the resurrection accounts people don't recognise Jesus? He's there with them, but either they don't recognise him at all or else they think it might be him but they're not sure. Mary Magdalene needs to hear him speak her name before she believes. Thomas needs to touch him. Cleopas and his companion recognise him in the breaking of bread. Later on, Peter and John recognise him because he again gives them a miraculous catch of fish. I think this is important. I don't know if they didn't recognise him because he looked different or because their eyes were blinded or just because they didn't expect to see him and could hardly believe the evidence of their eyes. We mostly tend to see what we expect to see and miss weird things that challenge our expectations.

The thing that most struck me this time when I read this was that Cleopas and Mary (if it was Mary) are not praying or at the Temple or studying the Bible when Jesus comes up to them. Their hearts aren't centred and peaceful in prayer. In fact, they're a mess. They're on the road, running away from danger, sad, confused, disappointed, maybe angry. This is where Jesus meets them. On the road. While they're still emotional wrecks.

And what he gives them is some understanding of what happened. He goes back to the Scriptures and opens them up. In today's language, he reframes the whole thing. He shows them it's not the disaster they thought but in fact, a fulfillment of prophecy, a necessary step. Of course, he told them this stuff before he died, too, but no one understood

him because it challenged their ideas way too much. Now they were able to hear it, and their hearts start to burn in response. They feel what he's saying is right.

And, maybe most important, he gives them his company. He's with them. In their journey, as they walk along. He comes to them where they are and stays with them. He doesn't say, "These guys are downers. I'm going to walk faster." He sticks with them.

That's how Jesus comes to us, too. He doesn't wait till we're praying or in church, though I do believe he does come to us in church and when we pray. I certainly hope he does! But he doesn't wait for that. He comes to us where we are, and especially when we're in a mess. Especially when we're at rock bottom and in despair. Not that we always recognise him. Have you noticed this in your life?

When I was about 19, in 2nd year University, I had this happen. My brother, Robert, had died in the spring and now it was fall and I was back at school and I was extremely sad. And worse! I had been hanging out with people who believed what's called the prosperity gospel, that is, that when you give your heart to Jesus, everything in your life starts to go well. God protects you from really bad stuff as soon as you become a Christian. Wouldn't that be nice? Well, I was young and that's what I had been taught and it was a very attractive belief. And when my brother died, that kind of shattered that whole idea. So my faith was shaken to the core as well as feeling grief.

One Friday night I was hitting rock bottom. I was so messed up, I started to wish I was dead. I knew I should call someone, get help from someone. But part of me wanted to wallow in the idea that no one really cared anyway. You know: "if they really cared, they'd notice how lousy I felt, even if I was locked in my room, or out walking in the dark alone." I thought I should call my best friend Stephen, who lived an hour's drive away, but I kind of knew if I did he'd come and get me for the weekend. And that would mean someone cared. And I wanted to prove no one did. Crazy eh? So I waited to 11 pm. No one would drive an hour here and an hour back at that time of the night. I finally called him and told him how I was feeling. "Pack your bag. I'm coming to get you," he said.

I spent the weekend with Stephen and his wife Paula. We didn't do much. Just hung out and did homework. But I knew someone cared. And I started to get better from that time on. That was Jesus. Jesus came to me in Stephen, when I was at rock bottom. I only realised it was Jesus much later, but it was. Have you ever had anything like that happen?

Jesus comes, but we don't always recognise him. Sometimes we're in a state of mind when we can recognise him right off. I so often feel Jesus' presence here when we are in the middle of worship, especially communion. I feel Jesus' presence with us at the prayer group, when we gather in his name. At times like that, my state of mind is such that I can recognise Jesus directly and feel his presence.

But so often we can't. So often, especially when we're feeling deep grief or confusion or fear or anger, we can't feel Jesus' presence directly. I'm pretty sure he's still there. In fact, I know he's still there. But we can't feel him or see him, because we're not up to it. Our eyes

are closed, by our circumstances, and we can't see him. Our hearts are maybe so full of anguish that we can't feel his presence with us.

And at those times, Jesus comes to us in other ways. He comes to us in each other, so very often. Like he came to me in Stephen and in Paula. Like he's come to me so many, many other times, through people, through friends who said something that gave me some good insight. Or whose arms around me gave me the hug I needed, God hugging me through them. Or who were just there with me, showing they cared. Have you experienced this?

Sometimes he comes to us in the beauties of nature. Ask most people where they feel closest to God and they'll tell you out in nature. I often feel that myself. Yesterday was Earth Day and we celebrated the earth and all its creatures at the parade at the waterfront. God doesn't just use human beings to come to us when we're in distress. God also uses other creatures. Like the deer Charles saw in the woods yesterday morning on his walk. They let him come right up to them. A gift of God when he was feeling nervous about the parade. After that he felt it would all be OK>

And Jesus comes to us in communion, too. Cleopas and his friend tell the others, "He was known to us in the breaking of the bread." When we share communion together, we suddenly become aware of Jesus' presence, in the bread and wine and also in each other. I think I told you I was at a church conference once that I felt I ought to be at but didn't really want to be there? I was there in body but not in heart, mind and spirit. I was holding way back. But the first night we celebrated the Eucharist and after I received communion with all the others, my eyes were opened and I saw Jesus present in each person there, bound to me as part of the Body of Christ. I recognised these strangers as my people, and after that I let myself be present. Mostly

And here's another thing I thought about reading this. It's great that when I'm in a mess, Jesus comes to me in these ways, and so often in another person who can be with me and help me and give me insight. Sometimes Jesus uses other people to be with us when we need him. Sometimes he uses us to be with others who need him. Sometimes we bear Jesus to other people, too, and other creatures.

That's our calling as Christians: to carry Jesus into the world and let him love people and all creation through us, wherever we find them, especially those who are suffering. Jesus is risen and Jesus is very much alive in the world. Mostly these days, Jesus works through his body, the church. That's you and me. Jesus is no longer physically present in the world as he was when he lived 2000 years ago. Now he is present through his Spirit in every person who has given their hearts to him. And he works through us to continue to spread his message that God loves us and wants to be with us. And whenever we love someone in Jesus' name, we are spreading that message.

We don't always recognise Jesus when we see him. Even when he is acting through us, we don't always recognise him. But if we are alert and start watching for him, we will see him. If we invite him in, as Cleopas and Mary did, we'll recognise him more and more. And we'll become more and more part of his work, the work he came here to do, the work

he died to do, the work he rose again to do. The work he is still doing, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, binding up the broken hearted, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming the time of the Lord's favour.