

Recognition

The ancient Greek myth *The Odyssey* tells of the epic tale of Odysseus, a valiant Greek warrior who fought bravely in the Trojan War but who was then prevented from returning home for several years, because the gods had decided to test him through a series of trials. His journeys carried him far and wide as he encountered mythic beasts and lands, many of which you may have heard of even if you've never read the story: the Cyclops, Scylla and Charybdis, the Sirens' song. While Odysseus is off sailing around the Mediterranean, back at his home, Odysseus' wife and family presume he must have died en route back from Troy. Finally, however, the day came when the gods released Odysseus and he returns home at last.

But instead of waltzing through the front door and crying out, "Honey, I'm home!", Odysseus decides that he wants to determine if anything has changed during his long absence. Did his wife still love him? Had she been faithful? In order to find out, Odysseus disguises himself as a stranger in need of a place to stay for a little while. The housekeeper, Euryclea, welcomes the traveler and performs the then-standard practice of foot-washing. As she does this, Euryclea regales the stranger with anecdotes about her long-lost master, Odysseus, whom she had also served as a nurse when he was young. She tells the traveler about how long her master has been missing and notes that by then Odysseus would be about the same age and of about the same build as the man whose feet she was washing. Now when Odysseus had been a young boy, she recalled, he was once gored by a wild boar, leaving a nasty scar on his leg. As Euryclea went about her servile task, suddenly her hand brushes against that old scar and instantly her eyes are opened and she recognizes, with great joy, her beloved master!

Recognition scenes like that have long exercised a strong pull on the human heart. Sometimes this can be used for comedic effect, as in the Robin Williams movie, *Mrs. Doubtfire* or in any number of episodes on the old *I Love Lucy* show when Lucy would disguise herself so as to sneak onto one of her husband's, shows. And you always waited eagerly for that moment when Desi Arnaz's eyes would widen right before he'd exclaim, "Luuucccy!"

Such shocks of recognition are good for laughs but they are also the stuff of high drama, as in *The Odyssey* and any number of plays, novels, and films across the centuries. And, of course, also in today's lesson from Luke's Gospel.

Let me set the scene. It's Sunday, Jesus died two days ago, and now two of his disciples, Cleopas and another disciple are on their way out of town. Their teacher and master, Jesus, had been killed like a common criminal, and their hopes of being delivered from subjection to the Romans were buried with him. The two travelers figure that by getting out of Dodge, maybe they, too, could walk away from their grief, leave the bad memories behind. Jerusalem had become like an empty house from which all the children had gone. It was haunted with memories, with defeated hope. Jerusalem was the place where their dreams had died. So they hit the road. As they are

walking, they come upon another traveler, a stranger. Cleopas and his companion, the stranger observes, are visibly distraught and the stranger asks them the cause. You can sense the pain and the sadness in what seems to be a snide response: “Are you the only one who hasn’t heard?” “Heard what?” the stranger asks. “Heard about Jesus of Nazareth, of course. He was a prophet but our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be crucified. And now, some of the women among us are claiming to have seen him alive...alive! Can you believe that? They’re delirious with grief, I guess. We thought Jesus was the real deal, the answer to our prayers, but now he’s just...dead.”

The stranger then shakes off his feigned ignorance and chides the two. “You sweet dummies! How could you miss this?” And he proceeds to do a little Bible study right there on the road, beginning with Genesis and going through the whole Old Testament (they *did* have several miles to cover). He retells the story of Israel and shows how the Scriptures, the whole of the Old Testament, all points to Jesus. The last time they’d heard anyone talk about the Bible in such an invigorating a fashion was . . . well, never mind.

Before they knew it, they’d come to their destination. The stranger bids them goodbye, but the disciples beg him to stay with them. The stranger accepts and after washing up, the three sit down to dinner. Before they knew what was happening, the stranger reaches for the flat bread, lifting it up in a strikingly familiar way. He then gives thanks, breaks it just so, and hands it to Cleopas and his friend. They knew instantly who he was, but just as they are ready to cry out, “Jesus!”, he was gone.

Reading this story, I have to wonder why the disciples didn’t recognize who it was that was walking with them for miles. Was Jesus wearing a disguise? Did the resurrected Jesus look different from the Jesus they knew as their teacher? Then again, perhaps it had less to do with Jesus and more to do with the disciples and the state they were in. I mean, they had just experienced a big trauma. They just saw their Lord beaten and killed, and they were grieving. If you’ve ever lost someone, you know how grief consumes your life, and can distort everything else. There’s this big gaping hole in your life and it’s hard to think about anything else, to reach beyond yourself. At least, that’s been my experience and how I make sense of the disciples’ astonishing blindness, why they don’t recognize Jesus. The same reason, I figure, Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for a groundskeeper on Easter day in John’s gospel. They couldn’t see beyond their grief, couldn’t see the truth, couldn’t recognize Jesus standing right next to them.

But the thing is, even though the two disciples did not recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus recognized them. Jesus saw them and *knew* what it was that was weighing so heavily on their hearts. And he let them, or more accurately *led* them so that they could come to the point where they could recognize who he was. He led them through the Scriptures, showing how they point to him, and then he ate with them, which is when Jesus became known to them, in the breaking of the bread. It was a real encounter with the real presence of Christ, as John Wesley would say.

Here we see how Emmaus isn’t simply a story about how two faithless, hopeless disciples came to see Jesus and realize that he had in fact been resurrected. It is about more than that. It’s about how the Risen Christ is present to us, some two thousand years later. I posed the question last

week as to how Jesus can be alive today even if we don't see him. One answer to that question is the one I gave last week—the resurrected Jesus is seen in how the Church—how we—live differently as a result. Here, in Luke's gospel, we get another answer. Here we see how the resurrected Jesus is known when we gather to interpret Scripture and to break bread and give thanks. It's not a coincidence that interpreting Scripture and breaking bread are the two main components of our worship. The Episcopal worship service involves Scripture and Sacrament, and the service is structured according to those two components, those two "acts" of worship—the Service of the Word (Scripture) and the Service of Holy Communion. Just as was the case with Cleopas and his friend, the resurrected Jesus is revealed to us in these two powerful ways.

But notice, the story of Emmaus doesn't end when the disciples recognize Jesus and Jesus disappears. What do the disciples do after they recognize Jesus—do they just sit back down and enjoy the rest of their dinner? Do they just say to themselves, "Wow. This was great! Let's keep this a secret just between the two of us. We were privileged to see something that others haven't seen. Let's not spoil the secret by telling somebody about it"? No, of course not. They immediately get up, put down a few coins to cover dinner and then hightail it back to Jerusalem, even though it's probably night by now and the bandits are out. They couldn't wait to tell the others the news. "The Lord is risen! The women who came back from the tomb were right! This thing isn't over! It's just beginning!"

In this way, these despondent, disheartened disciples become energetic, enthusiastic witnesses. And so it has been for Christians from the beginning. As I said last week, the fact that the church is still around, despite all of our failures, the fact that conversions are still taking place, people are still coming to faith, that's the best proof there is of the resurrection. In fact, if you have trouble believing in the reality of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, then you must find some other way of explaining how the disciples somehow went from frightened, depressed victims to courageous, outspoken witnesses. No appeal to the "spirit of Jesus" living on in his teachings, no claim of the disciples simply hiding the body explains what happened after Jesus died, how the church just exploded. Nothing less than a radical, miraculous event like the resurrection could account for it. That these two disciples go back to Jerusalem and tell the others is in itself a testimony to the surprise, the greatness, and the reality of what had happened to them—proof of the resurrection.

Here we see a further act of recognition. Jesus recognized the two disciples. The disciples recognized Jesus. And now, we could say, the disciples recognize themselves. Grief had caused them to lose hope, to lose faith, to lose themselves, their identity as disciples, Jesus' followers. With the revelation of Jesus, when not only their hearts were burning but their eyes were open again, it's then that they recover themselves, recognize themselves, and reclaim their role as disciples and missionaries.

And the same is true for us. The risen Christ is present not just in the Scriptures and in the Sacrament, but also in this spirit of witness that the disciples demonstrated and that we sometimes exhibit ourselves. I said that our worship service is composed of two acts, but that's not entirely true. There are not just two acts, but three—the Service of the Word, the Service of Holy Communion, *and* the Service of Mission. Here in worship we are taught scripture by Jesus. Here we share bread and wine with Jesus, indeed have communion with him in the bread and

wine. That's the great point of church, the great joy of Christian worship. But our worship doesn't conclude with the final hymn. Every Sunday, we are sent out with a charge—"Go in peace, Go forth in the name of Jesus, Go forth in the power of the Spirit." And so we go forth to engage in that third Act—the Service of Mission, of making the news of Jesus' resurrection known by word and deed. We leave church each Sunday as witnesses, witnesses to the resurrection.

I know that might seem a little scary, but consider this: You are here this morning because someone told you about Jesus—a parent or godparent or friend or teacher. No one is born with this faith, faith in Christ, and no one stumbles upon it after walks in the woods or by rummaging around in one's head. Someone had to love us enough to show us and tell us the good news. We believe what we believe and know what we know only through witness, testimony. And that's the only way others will know the risen Christ—if we tell them.

The Emmaus Road story is then not simply about reporting a particular event on a particular day, but a story about how the risen Christ comes to his followers again, and again, and again—through the Scriptures, through the Sacrament, and through the Spirit that empowers us to tell others about the risen Jesus, how he's alive and present with us even now, today. If we want to know where the risen Jesus is, we should look to how the Good News continues to change lives, and not only the lives of those who hear it but also the lives of those who tell it—our lives. May we be so blessed to be changed in this way. Amen.