

Stranger Jesus: *Luke 24:13-35*

April 19, 2015, Norwalk Christian Church, Easter 3, Year B

These two Sundays after Easter, we've taken a tour of some of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. Last Sunday, we were with John's Gospel in the Upper Room, when Jesus appeared to the locked-in Disciples, and showed them the wounds on his hands and his feet. This week, we're with Luke.

For us, it's been two weeks since Easter Sunday. We've gotten a little used to resurrection by now. Yet for the disciples walking to Emmaus, it's only been a few hours. Their head is still spinning from all that they have witnessed. The betrayal and arrest. The trial. The crucifixion. And then the women, who went to his tomb, and claimed his body was not there.

What do you do with such news? The one you trusted in, the one who was supposed to be different, to be the One...is dead, and now his body is lost. It's almost too much to bear, so they flee town, running from Jerusalem to Emmaus. What would you have done?

But here's the funny thing about Emmaus. As far as we know, Emmaus doesn't exist. There is no archeological evidence that such a town existed so close to Jerusalem. There's no historical evidence. No where else in scripture, not even in the other gospels, is Emmaus mentioned. Emmaus is, literally, no where. Confronted with the mystery that happened on Easter Sunday, these disciples get away from everyone and everywhere they have known, and head to no where.

Have you ever fled to Emmaus? Fredrick Buechner writes of Emmaus: "Emmaus can be a trip to the movies just for the sake of seeing a movie or to a cocktail party just for the sake of the cocktails. Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or" drinking more than you really want.... "Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday."

"Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life."

I wonder if we have ever been to Emmaus?

Strangely, just as these two disciples are trying to get as far away from Jesus and all that they think he did not accomplish, Jesus shows up. They don't know it's Jesus. In fact, no one seems to know Jesus in all the post-resurrection stories. They think he's a gardener.

They think he's a ghost. They think he's a stranger. Jesus is walking down the road with two of his own disciples, and they can't even recognize him.

Perhaps they never saw Jesus, in the first place. His face, maybe, but his life turned out so very different from what they expected, it was like they never even knew him.

And that is the topic of conversation as they speak to stranger Jesus. They tell him how disappointed they are with the one they had given their life to. They tell of the reports of those who visited the tomb that morning. They saw the empty tomb, but, as these two travelers say, almost ironically, "They did not see him."

I wonder how many times we do not see Jesus, even when he is standing right in front of us?

The strange part of the post-resurrection stories is that in all the stories, Jesus is never in the empty tomb. Never. When we arrive at the tomb, it's already empty. We show up on Easter morning, hoping to see the scene from Christian art, with Jesus emerging from the tomb triumphantly, as a flood of sunshine surrounds him. But those images are not in scripture.

When Easter Jesus is seen, it's always after the resurrection. Throughout all four gospels there are these post-resurrection stories of Jesus interrupting the ordinary. Mary goes to the tomb, expecting the body of Jesus, but instead finds an empty tomb. It's in the garden that she finds Jesus. As we saw last week, the disciples are in an upper room, huddled away not sure what will happen to them next, and suddenly, Jesus stands in their midst. Peter encounters the risen Christ while he's fishing.

Tombs are no place to find the risen Christ. It is here, in these ordinary, unlikely places, where we go to move on, get away, or give up, when we least expect it—that's where Jesus shows up.

Fredrick Buechner says, "It is precisely at such times as these that Jesus is apt to come, into the very midst of life at its most real and inescapable. Not in a blaze of unearthly light, not in the midst of a sermon, not in the throes of some kind of religious daydream, but...at supper time, or walking along a road."

As night approaches, this stranger Jesus begins to walk ahead of these two clueless disciples, as if he's going to leave. But then they make a bold move. "Stay with us," they say. And Jesus does.

The two disciples prepare an evening meal, much like the disciples prepared the meal on the night Jesus was betrayed. They want to show their guest hospitality, yet even though

this is their table and their bread, Jesus picks up the loaf of bread, as if it is his, and he “took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to him.”

If you’re not thinking about communion at this point, you’re not paying attention. Right there, in the midst of a meal with two disciples, this stranger takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, and THAT is when their eyes are open.

For when they see Jesus as the host of the table, sharing a meal, showing hospitality, then, and only then, does the stranger become Jesus in their midst.

Maybe that’s why we miss Jesus. Maybe we are looking in the wrong place. We look for the fanfare and miraculous. We expect for the risen Christ to appear to us from us on high, interrupting our journey to nowhere with angelic throngs and showers of light.

Instead, Jesus appears in the midst of life, right in the midst of our doubts and fears, the midst of the mess of real, everyday life, on our journey to nowhere. At a table, sharing bread is Jesus.

Had we spent some time reading through Luke’s entire gospel, we would have seen that everywhere in the Gospel he is always at a table. In one story from Luke 14, Jesus is in the middle of one of these dinners, when one of the dinner guests just stands up and yells, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” This guest has been paying attention.

The interruption prompts Jesus to tell one of his parables. “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent [a messenger] to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all ... began to make excuses. ... [One said] ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies.’ Another..., ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies.’ [And] Another ..., ‘I have just been married, .. [I’m not going anywhere!].’ So the [messenger] returned and reported this to his master. [And it made the owner of the house angry and [he] said to his [messenger], ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ [The messenger did it, and everyone came. He reported back to his master,] ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ Then the master said ..., ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

Look for Jesus in empty tombs, if you want. Or in empty churches and empty doctrines. Gaze up at the sky...or look, deep within your soul. You may find something. But if it’s Jesus you want to see, look along the road to nowhere. Look at the face of the stranger. Look at the one who sits with you at the table.

Had the two disciples not invited the stranger into their home, they never would've seen Jesus. And I wonder if our Gospel writer wants to tell us something: if it's Jesus we are after...if it's Jesus we are seeking...then inviting strangers to a meal might be the best way to start.

Christ has risen.

Christ has risen, indeed.

And he's waiting for us, right here at the table.