

A Sideways Glance

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Luke 24:13-48

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The resurrection stories in the gospels are so lamentably short, so maddeningly brief that when you read them you invariably hunger for more. The four gospel writers are a lot like the sample ladies you see at the grocery store on a Saturday afternoon passing out their miniature spoons of ice cream and their thimbles of lemonade. We get just a taste and nothing more. And the sad thing is that at least once we've all gotten back in line for two or three more helpings. We fare no better in the resurrection stories. Matthew gives us about a teaspoonful in his gospel as he jumps from Jesus' encounter with the two Marys at the tomb to the mountain in Galilee where he commissions his disciples before being taken from their sight. Mark is especially stingy. He hurries by the resurrection event altogether at first and then, as if having second thoughts, returns to the scene and quickly tosses us a few crumbs to nibble on. John is more generous with his helpings, taking us from the dimly lit, locked house of frightened fisherman to the wide expanse of the Sea of Tiberius and breakfast on the beach. Just when we think John might satisfy our appetites, however, he teases us with the statement, "I *could* tell you more stories but there simply isn't room or time to tell them." Which leaves us scratching our heads and wondering why he couldn't have at least tried. Luke leaves our stomachs growling, hungering for more as well. Jesus, in the midst of perhaps the most theologically important moment of history plays hide and seek with two unsuspecting travelers on their way to Emmaus. Why can't Jesus respect a profound theological moment? And yet there he is, in all four gospels, hinting, whispering, breathing, eating, offering a morsel here, a crumb there, always leaving the disciples—and us—straining our eyes to catch every detail, to remember every moment, to savor every step.

Luke tells us that two disciples had at last decided to step away from the noisy, bustling, pilgrim-filled streets of Jerusalem to their own

hometown, and put the disturbing, sorrowful events of the weekend behind them. It was late afternoon on the day after the Sabbath. The sun was already coloring orange in the west. As the noise of the city receded behind them, it only made room for noisy questions to take up the space in their minds. And before long Cleopas and his traveling companion—we're not told who the traveling companion was—were busy talking and discussing all these things with each other. But the original language is a bit stronger than our polite English translators give it credit for. The word for “discussed” can easily be translated “argued” or “debated,” which probably fits the situation quite well. They were hashing it all out. Each had their theories. Each had their ideas. Each had the plot behind the events lined up in their minds like crime scene investigators, or like a husband and wife arguing over who was going to get the last ice cream sandwich. In fact, some commentators believe that the traveling companion may have been Cleopas' wife, which would explain the arguing between them—or, rather, the “debating” between them, as we often tell our children. “Mommy and Daddy aren't arguing, we're debating. Passionately.” Well, the two were so enthralled in their debating and/or arguing that they didn't see another traveler slowly catching up to them and coming within earshot. “What are you two *'discussing'*?” We, of course, know that it is Jesus. But the two travelers do not. And the reason that they do not recognize him is because Luke tells us “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

“Their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” We're not told why the disciples were blinded in such a way. Some have said it was some dark work of the devil. Others believe it was Christ himself who did not wish to be recognized as though he were at some masquerade party and it was not yet time for the faces of the partygoers to be revealed. I believe it was neither of those reasons. I don't think it was something external to this pair of disciples at all, but rather something within them that kept them from seeing. That is the most disturbing thing of all, isn't it? It certainly is the most ironic. The ones who accused this stranger of being oblivious to the goings-on just a few miles away were themselves the most oblivious. Their eyes couldn't see the truth walking with them, talking with them.

But it is even more disturbing because my eyes are like theirs, and maybe yours are too. I glance out at the world and see the disappointment, the fear, the brokenness, but I often fail to see the beauty or to appreciate the goodness in the world. Have you ever heard the song “What a Wonderful World” sung by Louis Armstrong? Who hasn’t, right? The lyrics are so simple and beautiful:

I see trees of green, red roses too. // I see them bloom, for me and you. // And I think to myself... what a wonderful world. // I see skies of blue, and clouds of white. // The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night // And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

I remember the very first time I heard that song. It was part of the soundtrack to the movie *Good Morning Vietnam* where it is played over a montage of bombings and other scenes of violence that took place during the Vietnam War. The juxtaposition of the innocent lyrics of Armstrong’s song with the destructive reality of the world in which the song came to be was intentional. It was meant to jab us with its irony and to make us a bit cynical in the process, I think. In a world marred by disasters and violence, how can we possibly call it wonderful? We stare out at the world every day, but do we truly see? Or are we so preoccupied with our disappointments, busyness, and worries that we can’t recognize what is truly important? That we can’t see the God who is there and has been there all along?

That is something of what Cleopas and his friend are experiencing as they tell the tale to this stranger. “We had hoped that he was going to be the one.” All that he did, all that he said, all that he promised he would do—it seemed so right, so sure, so real. Surely he *was* the one. But now...? And then there was this troubling bit about the women and the story that they had to tell. But they couldn’t believe them because there didn’t seem to be anything left *to* believe in. No one comes back from the dead. Like the Louis Armstrong song played over scenes of destruction, innocence, beauty and truth were like the naïve birthday wishes of children. Real hope was gone in this fallen world. For these two, the story and the hope were gone. All that was left was just debating over details.

It is at this depth of despair that the stranger speaks to the hearts of Cleopas and his friend. Though they may not recognize hope, even when it is walking alongside us—though WE may not recognize hope when it is staring us in the face—the One who is hope incarnate recognizes us, knows that we have trouble seeing and reaches out to us right where we are. The stranger invites the two on a different kind of journey along a different kind of path. The Word made flesh takes them through the story. The big story. The one with the capital S. The Story of God’s love for humanity and the story of humanity’s inability—or unwillingness—to see that God will not rest until every wayward heart is brought back to God’s heart. Ultimately this would mean that it would have to be God’s own Son who would take on the perilous mission and send for God’s children. God’s Son would be the one to suffer to bring them all back and only then would the Son allow himself to rest in God’s glory. Slowly the story took shape in the two disciples’ minds. At the intensity of the stranger’s impassioned sermon, their hearts burned red and hot like the crimson sun sinking low behind the hills.

As they entered the village and neared the disciples’ home, the stranger succumbed to their insistent urges to be their guest for the evening. Supper was brought out and suddenly this stranger-turned-guest was now the host and the hosts became the guests in their own home! The mysterious man took the bread, lifted it toward heaven and spoke the familiar and ancient prayer, “Blessed are You, our Lord and God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” At which point, he tore the bread and passed it to the two disciples. Mouths agape. Breaths stilled. Eyes wide as silver dollars. Arms frozen in the act of taking the bread from his hands. Suddenly there *He* was and He was *there*. Crumbs on his chest. Bread in his hands. Elbows on the table. A few moments ago they were blind. But now they could see. It was *Him*.

There is a scene in the movie *Saving Private Ryan* where Private Ryan is talking to the captain of the small platoon that was sent into the battlefields of France during WWII to find him and bring him home because all of his brothers have been killed in the war. The two are sitting among the bombed-out buildings on a rubble-strewn street. Private Ryan speaks, “I can’t see my brothers’ faces. I’ve been trying but I can’t see their faces at all.

Has that every happened to you?” And I think we could all answer yes to that question. Our memories are faulty, and after spending a long time away from a loved one, it can easily happen that we have trouble bringing to mind the memory of their face. As hard as we try to concentrate on remembering what they looked like, we simply can't conjure up their image in our mind. It is as though our minds are intentionally teasing us, refusing to show us what we so desperately wish to see. And the harder we try the more elusive the picture becomes and before long we're chasing after the wind.

The captain replies to the young private, “You've got to think of a context. ... You don't just think about their faces, you think about something specific, something you've done together.” That is the trick to fool our minds into bringing the image of our loved ones near again. We remember best when we remember our loved one's actions. If we include in our remembering not just their face or their body, but what it is that they were doing in those memories, then suddenly the picture is brought into sharp relief: the way he held his fork when he ate, the particular gait of her walk as she came near, the angle of his outstretched arms that moment before a hug, the way that she brushed that lock of hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear, the way his knotted fingers curled around a hand of playing cards during a game of rummy. In this kind of sideways glance through the peripheral vision of our mind's eye we can see most clearly. For the disciples it was in this simple act of breaking bread that they had seen their old Rabbi do countless times before that their eyes were opened at last and they could really and truly see through the dark shroud of hopelessness that this world places in front of our eyes. Now they have seen hope, now they have seen grace, now they have seen God.

This is the mystery of the resurrection for us who cannot grasp hold of the feet of the risen Christ, but instead must cling to these precious few stories left for us by the four gospel writers: that though we cannot gaze directly into that face that we have never seen, to us is given these sideways glances of seeing Christ in the our sharing of our bread, in the loving of our enemies, in the forgiving of those who injure us, and in the proclaiming of the good news of salvation in him. When we're desperate for a glimpse of the resurrected Christ and are lost in despair over that fact that we can't see

him anywhere, we must think of him in context. Where have we seen Christ at work in the context of our families? What have you done together with Christ in the context of your jobs or school? And what about other times of your lives: at play, in church, at the grocery store, and in the dead of night as you lay wide awake on your bed praying for your children, your spouse, your life?

When Jesus gave his disciples, and all of us, the gift of the Supper, he asked his friends, and all of us, to remember him. In this act of eating and drinking and sharing we remember Jesus best. We may not see his face, we may not make out the shape of his brow or the cut of his hair, but we recognize him as we remember this bread and cup that he shared with his friends in that candle-lit room. It is the way the church has always remembered Jesus best: when they imitate his sharing, his mercy, his love and grace given freely for all, so that all might be saved.