

Making Sense of Mystery

Luke 24.13-31 (The Message)

Mothers' Day

May 8, 2011

"And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared."

- Luke 24.30-31 (The Message)

That same day two of them were walking to the village Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem. They were deep in conversation, going over all these things that had happened. In the middle of their talk and questions, Jesus came up and walked along with them. But they were not able to recognize who he was. He asked, "What's this you're discussing so intently as you walk along?" They just stood there, long-faced, like they had lost their best friend. Then one of them, his name was Cleopas, said, "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened during the last few days?" He said, "What has happened?" They said, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene. He was a man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God and all the people. Then our high priests and leaders betrayed him, got him sentenced to death, and crucified him. And we had our hopes up that he was the One, the One about to deliver Israel. And it is now the third day since it happened. But now some of our women have completely confused us. Early this morning they were at the tomb and couldn't find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn't see Jesus." Then he said to them, "So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don't you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?" Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him. They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. He acted as if he were going on but they pressed him: "Stay and have supper with us. It's nearly evening; the day is done." So he went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared.

The task we have set for ourselves in the next few minutes, as my title indicates, is to make sense of the mystery of God's presence in our lives. This task falls to us because today's

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gospel reading, one of my favorite resurrection appearance stories, doesn't so much unravel this mystery as set it before us to *underscore* it, to bring it to our attention, and to reveal it not as an answer to any question, but as a question itself. This Emmaus scene ends in a most abrupt manner ...as soon as the disciples finally have their eyes opened, the risen Lord disappears. This is strange, is it not? Cleopas and friend have just spent hours with their Lord discussing pressing spiritual matters, and when they finally become aware of his presence, he up and disappears.

This, then, is the mystery we need to probe. Why would the Christ disappear so abruptly? Does it mean that God's presence is fleeting, over almost before it begins? Does it mean that God is fickle, appearing and disappearing at most inopportune times? Does it mean that although he was present in the past, the risen Lord is now absent from us? These are significant questions, and faith demands that we probe their mystery.

Before we do so, however, I would like to point out another unique aspect of this story. It's not just a story about mystery; it also shows the compassion of Luke as a pastor, and the boundless love of the Christ as redeemer. Luke wrote this gospel late, you see, among the second generation of Christians who hadn't been around to know Jesus of Nazareth first hand. Some, in fact, had not even been born at the time of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Over time they began to fret about how they could know this Jesus. It was fine that most of the Apostles were eye witnesses to his ministry, but what good did that do them? How could this Jesus be present to them as well, so far removed from his earthly ministry? Luke the pastor, in his compassion, included this story to assure them that they could, indeed, know this Jesus, and that he was present to them in the communion experience of worship; indeed present any time they opened themselves to others in honesty and compassion. Break bread together, this story says, and you will do so in the Christ's presence. What a tremendous comfort this story would be for these second generation Christians; and not just them, it should be a comfort to Christians down to our day and beyond, because the promise of the Christ's presence is for all.

It should be clear that this story is not about absence, it is about the promised presence of the risen Lord in our midst. And yet this scene ends abruptly with his disappearance. What

sense are we to make of this? How does the disappearance fit with a story that promises presence?

I am convinced that the abrupt disappearance of Jesus serves to define the nature of the Lord's presence in our lives, and to indicate its meaning for our faith experience. It indicates what God's presence is like, and what we can expect from it. In this sense, the mysterious disappearance of Jesus would first say to the early disciples – as it should to us – that it is not the kid next door coming to sell discount coupons for his soccer team. No, it is the resurrected Christ present, truly present, to believers. The one who passed through darkness and death to be transformed – to rise above death altogether – is present and yearning to be a part of the lives of all believers. It is not the kid next door who makes an appearance when we celebrate communion; it is the risen Christ. And it is not the kid next door who makes an appearance when we share fellowship beyond the ritual of communion. When we offer genuine hospitality to others, as did Cleopas and friend, it is indeed the resurrected Christ who is present in and among us.

Again, the mysterious disappearance of Jesus indicates that God's presence to us is God's initiative. God doesn't respond to our bidding. God doesn't heel, and come on demand. Rather, God takes the initiative to come to us. It is not ours to demand God's presence, but to humbly open ourselves to God's initiative, to God's promise to be with us. Humility opens one's heart to God's presence.

Finally, the Christ abruptly disappears when the disciples recognize his presence because he wants them to see his presence in the face of others. He wants Cleopas to see him in the face of his friend, and his friend to see him in the face of Cleopas. The risen Lord wants them to know that whenever they break bread together – in the formal ritual of communion or sharing a journey through dust and heat – he is present. It is the same for us; when we share with each other with honesty and compassion, God is present in those we serve. For Luke's Jesus, the *other* in our experience is the one called *the least of these* in Matthew. Whatever we do for the least of these, Matthew's Jesus says, we do for him. The risen Lord is present when we open ourselves in compassion and honesty to others, truly seeking their wholeness and wellbeing.

This promise speaks volumes on how we should live our everyday lives. It speaks volumes on how we should interact with others. Each encounter – including the most mundane – can be... should be, a sacred encounter in which grace, compassion, and truth are made visible. Wow! Perhaps we should make ourselves a bracelet to remind us how to act toward others. But I don't think the WWJD bracelet would do. You remember this movement, I am sure. Some years ago folk were wearing WWJD bracelets to remind them to ask what Jesus would do in any given situation before they decided what they would do. This is not bad, so far as it goes. But the Lord's presence in the face of the other is more intimate, more personal, and more immediate. So we should make a bracelet that reads: WWIDITWJ, what would I do if this was Jesus? I am kidding of course; but were we to remind ourselves every time we encounter another that it is the Christ before us, I think we might act just a wee bit differently. At any rate this is the opportunity we have as we gather together in worship, as we open our hearts to each other, as we share a coffee at Starbucks, as we watch a soccer game... I think you get my drift.

If we are to see the Christ in the face of the other – any other – what are we to make of the assassination of Osama bin Laden and the celebrations that broke out spontaneously when the news was released this past week? Were these celebrations appropriate? Was this truly a cause for revelry? Many have said no; that on moral grounds we should not celebrate the death of anyone, even one who had committed such heinous crimes against humankind. I think that a more nuanced response is called for. I can't find any reason to wag a morally superior finger at anyone who gathered to celebrate at the White House or at Ground Zero. I fully understand the impulse to celebration. There have been ten years of suppressed emotion, frustration, and the weight of one war after another in which we put our young people in harm's way. At one level many folk were simply venting these emotions and celebrating some sense of just closure to this seemingly interminable situation.

There will come a time, however, for cooler, more composed heads to prevail, and at this time we should recognize that God never celebrates the death of any individual. While it may be expedient for one person to die for the good of many, in God's eyes it is still

lamentable. We can celebrate the fact that a step has been taken toward peace, justice, and perhaps reconciliation; but it is still lamentable that this had to happen with the loss of life.

This is the practical import of seeing the Christ in the face of others; of understanding that there are spiritual consequences at stake in every personal encounter; it makes us slow, ever so slow to move toward violence. It makes us agonize over decisions that affect the wellbeing of others. It makes us ask, "What would I do if this was Jesus?"