

Kirby Lawrence Hill
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1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

RECOGNITION

I'll be going to some lectures at my seminary over the next few days. I always feel enriched hearing from insightful faith leaders on areas that effect the life of the church. But since I graduated in the class of 1984, this year will also be a time for my seminary class reunion. Three decades – and you probably wouldn't and shouldn't believe me if I were to tell you that your precocious pastor graduated from seminary when he was only sixteen. Three decades – there are some of my classmates that I haven't seen since we graduated. And there comes the question as to whether I will even recognize them when I see them. Some of us have less hair in certain places or hair that is a different color in other places than we had thirty years ago. There may be some combination of additional wrinkles and pounds that make it hard to recognize those with whom I share a common history. And of course all of us are much wiser after decades of experience, but that doesn't always show up in one's appearance.

It wasn't a matter of decades, but probably only a matter of days since Cleopas had seen Jesus. We don't know how close of a Jesus follower he and his traveling companion on the road to Emmaus had been, but they knew a lot about what had been happening in Jerusalem. They described the closest of Jesus' followers as 'our group.' They knew of his crucifixion and were devastated by it. They also had heard that Jesus' tomb had been found empty earlier that day and that women had seen a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive. But they told the stranger who had begun walking with them that their fellow followers "did not see (Jesus)." How ironic is that?

Luke tells us from the start that this stranger who was walking with them was Jesus, so these travelers are in the midst of a reunion and they don't even know it. The primary question as we hear the story is when will Jesus tell them who he is or when will they recognize him? Perhaps it was not that Jesus looked that much different from what he had before, but that their total lack of expectation that they would see their Lord kept them from recognizing him. Or perhaps it was their great sense of loss and hopelessness that kept them from seeing anything very clearly. Not only were they mourning a friend's tortuous death, they were grieving the loss of what they believed and the loss of hope about what could have been. It seemed all too clear that this initiative through Jesus of broad redemptive change had come to an abrupt and violent end.

No, they did not recognize the one walking with them, but he had no trouble recognizing them in their need. As those full of grief and empty of hope, he joins them in their sad journey and draws them out with a few questions, listening as they pour out their hearts. They recount the experience of their great loss as the stranger lends a compassionate ear. The last bit of their experience they share was something that had further confused them. Women from their group had gone to the tomb and found it empty. There was talk that Jesus could actually be alive, but these two went ahead and left Jerusalem. Their state of despair had no room for good news at that point.

After the two had recounted their sad story, the compassionate listener recognizes the

opportunity to take on another role, that as wise teacher. He recounts the scriptural accounts of how God's story became intertwined with the human story, of the divine initiatives to reach out to a confused humanity that often did not recognize what God was doing in their midst. Cleopas and his companion knew what was in the scriptures. They just didn't know what it all meant and how it related to their situation, not altogether unlike us. But this mysterious teacher opened them once again to the possibility that God could operate even through tragic circumstances. As they walked along, something began to overtake their hopelessness. What had seemed to be a long slog of a journey suddenly was moving along all too briskly. They get to their destination, to their house in Emmaus, and want the encounter to continue. The stranger who took on the role of compassionate listener, then wise teacher seemed to be heading on, but Cleopas and his companion plead with him to stay. It was almost evening, not a time to be traveling. They had received enough compassion to be able to reflect a bit of it themselves in offering hospitality. The fellow traveler comes in to stay with them. But then the one who had become their guest, serves as a host. At their table, he takes the bread, blesses and breaks it and gives it to them.

It is at this point, that they finally realize that they are at a reunion. The reunion meal seems to be the primary event. Luke tells us, "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." And we could say that the presence of the resurrected Lord can be recognized in that sacramental meal where bread is blessed, broken, and given. But that only occurs after Cleopas and his companion had met compassion on their difficult journey, after they had heard the interpretation of how God's story still connected with their story. Even though they had been moving away from the holy city, they realized that they had been on a pilgrimage. They had not gone to the reunion; the reunion had come to them. But then, it is suddenly over – the one who had been the compassionate listener, wise teacher, and host at their table suddenly is gone.

We too get these glimpses of the presence of our resurrected Lord. Our eyes may not be open to the abiding presence of the risen Christ, but we do get these glimpses along the way of our journeys of the heart and in our searching of the scriptures, and in our table fellowship. This story is often referred to as the journey to Emmaus, but the journey doesn't end there. No, even after evening had fallen, the resurrection news and experience had to be shared. Cleopas and his companion rush back to Jerusalem that night. This time they knew they were going to a reunion. When they got there, they discovered that they were not alone in having a resurrection experience to share. The other stories added to their joy, helping them to recognize that the sharing of these experiences with the risen Lord would be something they wanted and needed to continue to do.

As we travel, as we study scripture, as we commune, we know to look for reunion with our resurrected Lord. But it is good to realize that Jesus showed up even when his followers weren't looking for him. He found them when they needed him most. He enables the reunion whether we are looking for it or not. Yes, here is a story of two people journeying, who are accompanied and then transformed along the way, who think they have reached their destination and then, by God's grace, they recognize a presence that gives them somewhere else they need to go. One of them was named Cleopas, and who was the other? Luke leaves it a blank space. Is the other you? Is it me? In surprising ways and with surprising company, resurrection reunion happens, by God's grace.