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SERMON

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Burning Hearts

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We continue this morning in the season of Eastertide with another resurrection story. Though at first, those in it do not realize it is that kind of story.

Today we turn to the Gospel of Luke, to the first day of the week, after Jesus had been crucified and buried.

One of my college majors was history, and I have always been drawn to the stories of ordinary people caught up in world-changing events. That is where Luke places us, not at the empty tomb or in the upper room, but on a road leading away from Jerusalem with two followers of Jesus who are grieving, confused, and trying to make sense of all that happened. They carry with them shattered hopes, rumors of an empty tomb, and questions without answers.

And somewhere along that road, Jesus comes alongside them, not in glory but as an easy-to-miss stranger.

In Luke's Gospel, Christ is made known not in spectacle, but in ordinary moments—on the road, in conversation, and at the table.

So, we join these travelers, and perhaps notice our own hearts begin to strangely warm.

Before we read from Luke, please join me in prayer.

Prayer for Illumination

Living God,
Open the scriptures to us,
soften our hearts,
and kindle within us a quiet burning—
that we might recognize Christ still among us.
Amen.

Listen for God's word to us today.

Scripture

Luke 24:13-35

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.^[b] ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹ He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth,^[c] who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.^[d] Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of

angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.” ²⁵ Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah^[e] should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us^[f] while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Hindsight is 20-20

In elementary school, my favorite book series was Encyclopedia Brown. I’ve had the joy of revisiting the series with my kids over the past few years. Encyclopedia Brown follows the 10-year-old Leroy “Encyclopedia” Brown, the

observant, Sherlock-Holmes-kind-of-prodigy and son of the town's police chief. Other kids come to Encyclopedia with tough cases, like the "Case of the Lemonade Stand" or the "Astronaut Duck."

Like an Agatha Christie novel or a Glass Onion movie, these intro mystery books place clues hidden in plain sight. But it's hard to pick up what's important and what's really going on. There are red herrings. There is misdirection. In the end, the mystery is explained. You can give up or check your answer by flipping to the back of the book, where the clues are laid out, and the whodunit seems obvious all along in retrospect.

Hindsight is 20-20.

How helpful would it be sometimes to turn to the end of the story to understand more clearly what is happening now in our own lives?

We can look back now on years past and see what mountains we made of molehills and what truly pivotal moments we did not recognize. What mistakes faded out of memory and what graces landed us where we are today. Hindsight is 20-20. The end of the story makes the whole thing come together.

These two disciples walked the road away from Jerusalem, with clues they were unable to piece together. They had hoped Jesus was the Messiah. They had believed he would be the one to redeem Israel. But he had died at the hands of the religious leaders and Roman authorities. Their hopes had shattered.

But earlier that day, women had claimed an outlandish story—They had gone to the tomb. It was empty, and an angel had

told them that Christ was alive. Other disciples confirmed it at least in part: The tomb was empty.

The pieces did not, yet, fit together.

They had followed Jesus. They saw him heal, feed 5000, flip the tables of the Temple, teach with authority, and proclaim that God's Kingdom was at hand. I imagine Cleopas and his friend or wife or whoever this was with him were in the crowd on Palm Sunday, laying down branches and crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!" They were ready for Jesus to inaugurate God's upside-down Kingdom.

They expected a Messiah who would rule, bring peace, and end suffering by defeating their enemies; not one who would die.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written that Emmaus "is the road you walk when your team has lost, your candidate has been defeated, your loved one has died—the long road back to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again."¹

They were leaving Jerusalem, the other disciples, and the hopes that had brought them there.

They explain all of this to a stranger along the way.

Missing the Signs

In a sentence that would make any English teacher squirm in discomfort, Luke tells us, "They were kept by from recognizing him." Get out your red pens. "They were kept..." by whom? Or what?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Blessed Brokenness," *Gospel Medicine*, pp. 20–21.

How and why did they not recognize Jesus?

Did God prevent their brains from registering who they were speaking to?

Was he in disguise? Glasses, mustache, and all?

Were they so grief-stricken that they just could not see what was right in front of them?

Luke does not say.

There is a bit on the Fallon Show where famous musicians disguise themselves and busk in the subway. There you have someone like Ed Sheeran playing his most famous songs, and people just passing right by.

An unexpected person, out of context, can be easy to miss. Jesus appears to them a stranger. This word indicates not only that they don't know him, but that he is someone "other" to them. A migrant or foreigner, someone who is not like them. Which is an understatement for once-dead, now-alive risen Christ. He is "other" to them. But these are followers of Christ, and even in their shock and disappointment, they are people who make room for the stranger. They take a risk to trust someone who is not "one of them."

And he gives them a new perspective on the heartbreak and confusion of the prior three days.

But it's not until after the seven-mile-walk, after what must have been the best Bible Study ever, after they invite this stranger to dine with them, after the blessing and breaking of bread that it clicks. And by then, he's gone.

They look back, and it's 20-20: Weren't their hearts burning all along?

Burning Hearts

In my time in ministry, I've gotten to work alongside many Methodists. My first job in ministry, in fact, as a youth director at a United Methodist Church.

As a cradle Presbyterian, I was grateful that they had longtime youth volunteers who led confirmation class. My first year there, I was more a student of the class than a teacher. And I learned a lot about John Wesley. And in a way that would make John Calvin roll over in his grave, I came to appreciate methodist theology and practice.

You may or may not know the story of Aldersgate. It is an origin story of sorts for the Methodist movement.

In 1738, John Wesley reluctantly attended a group meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. He had not gained much from these Bible studies in the past, but as he heard a reading from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, he felt his "heart strangely warmed." He wrote this later in his journal, looking back on the evening, trying to give words to the change within himself that he had experienced in such an ordinary moment.

Wesley would go on to place great emphasis on small group meetings like the one that warmed his heart. He would go on to create a theological term for what had led him to that place, "prevenient grace." And what transformed him in that moment, "justifying grace."

The Presbyterian I am, I'd just say it is all simply grace. Jesus showing up when we don't expect it. It is God pursuing us with goodness and mercy all the days of our lives, as Psalm 23 puts it, and sometimes we notice.

For Wesley, for these disciples along the road, for us, it is easy to miss Christ right beside us. In unexpected, unremarkable places.

On the road miles from the action; with people whose names are lost to history; in a place you didn't even want to be that night.

Has your heart burned before?

Has an injustice caused your heart to flare?

Has a passion lit you up?

Has a conversation moved you, changed your perspective, caused your heart to skip a beat?

Has the low simmer of assurance and love warmed your heart?

The disciples did something radical. Even without understanding fully what was happening, they follow their hunch: This conversation, this stranger, is worth the risk, the time, the cost of a meal. Let's be honest, Jesus bailed before the bill could be paid.

The disciples followed the gently nudging of their hearts even when their heads hadn't pieced together the mystery, yet. They walked alongside Christ, invited him to stay, and let him upend their expectations.

There is a man named Kent Burris, who has become an internet sensation for his Texas restaurant reviews. Kent is a middle-aged white guy, and he tries food from all different cultures, at immigrant-owned restaurants around Houston. He gets out of his comfort zone. And sometimes his reviews land on, “It’s just not for me.” Other times, like a recent post eating at an Iranian restaurant, he is just in heaven, “This is for me.”

When Kent walks in, he understands that he might be perceived as not belonging, even being a potential threat. Someone who might come in to hassle folks there or to complain when something, “Just isn’t for him.” His humility, curiosity, and humor immediately break down the barrier of “other.” In the breaking of bread—and naan, tortillas, pita, injera—expectations are upended and perspectives can be transformed.

It is heartwarming.

Friends, this Easter season, we proclaim that Christ is risen. I don’t want to get too pedantic, but I will for a moment. The verb, “is risen,” is in a tense we do not have in English. It’s an aorist verb. It is a verb that does not necessarily indicate past, present, nor future. It is an action that happened within and beyond time.

Christ is risen, quite literally he stood to get out of the tomb.
Christ is risen, walking along the road to Emmaus.
Christ is risen, still, here and now.
In your life and our world, Christ is risen, even when we can’t quite put all the pieces together, yet.

Can you feel it in your heart?

Will you take the risk to make room for Christ to surprise you along the way?

Notice what makes your heart burn. Jesus may have been there all along.
Amen.

Charge and Benediction

A former seminary professor of mine often reminded us that the right question to ask is not, “What would Jesus do?” But rather, “What is Jesus doing?”

Christ is risen.

So, pay attention. What makes your heart “strangely warm?” How can you join in what Jesus is doing in your life and in the world?

And take with you this blessing, that the love of God the Father, the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship and guidance of the Holy Spirit are with you now and always.
Amen.



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