

"Eyes Wide Open"  
April 30, 2017  
Text: Luke 24:13-35

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ  
Fourth Sunday of Easter

*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*

*And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.*

*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?"*

*He asked them, "What things?"*

*They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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."*

*Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

*As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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.*

*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.*

So there's the risen Jesus on the day of Resurrection; that first Easter Sunday as we now call it. He meets up with two people on a road—two sad people who had been traveling with the disciples following Jesus in his ministry. It's a man called Cleopas and another unnamed person. The two are walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. Why are they going there? We don't know. It's that road to nowhere in particular; back to what they know, perhaps, back to a life that carries on, for sure, but now lacking something. Gone now is their hope. Gone now is their time in the presence of God. They are disappointed, grieving, confused perhaps, unsure after the crucifixion what happens next. It's the shock that sets in after a major calamity. Even Jesus notices it:

*"What are you discussing with each other?"* he asks them. *They stand still, looking sad.* And for some reason, they do not recognize him. He is just a stranger who has shown up on the road.

#### The Stranger

Apprehension. Suspicion. Fear. These are the things that surface when we interact with a stranger. Will there be openness or will we be guarded? Is this person safe or a potential threat? It could go a number of ways when someone we don't know engages us in conversation. Internal safety mechanisms go off, red flags go up, and at best we proceed carefully. But when Jesus wants to know what they are talking about, Cleopas takes the risk and engages:

*"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"*

And then Jesus, playing along kind of like Tom Sawyer watching his own funeral, asks:

*"What things?"*

Then it all comes out. *"The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him."*

They go on about how they hoped he was the Messiah and would deliver them from all their oppression. And then they rattle off how things happened that morning with some of the women in their group having gone to the grave and finding that Jesus's body is missing, and then encounter angels who said Jesus was alive, but that none of them had seen him with their own eyes. It's the rambling of people suffering shock and trauma trying to piece things together and make some kind of sense out of tragedy. Rumors are spreading, angels are making wild proclamations, and there is no certainty. All they know is the body is not in the tomb and they have no idea where it is. This is a crisis of faith, and all reference points of what to believe are missing. Their teacher, their friend, their Lord has been crucified. And now, in their sadness and grief, all they can do is spill their guts to a stranger about things not working out like they hoped.

#### A Long Bible Study

There's an old expression: *"There are none so blind as those who cannot see."* Jesus stands in front of them and yet they cannot recognize him. His own followers. How does that happen? You think you know someone. And then one day they show up

and you don't even recognize them. At one time you knew them so well. Now, they're like a stranger.

Then he says to them, *"Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"* Then he tells them all about Moses and the prophets, and explains how it all relates to him. Moses and prophets. That's another way of saying the entire Hebrew scriptures; what we call the Old Testament. That's a long Bible study. But there are seven miles between Jerusalem and Emmaus. So, maybe that's somewhere between two and three hours of walking. Jesus uses the opportunity to teach.

After all that, do they recognize him yet? No, but something must be working in them because they extend an invitation. Sometimes the walls between strangers and us begin to disappear. Common ground is discovered. We notice we are not so different after all, and trust begins to grow, and we begin to care about each other.

*As they get close to Emmaus, Jesus walks ahead as if he is going on. But they urge him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."*

He may be a stranger. But some kind of connection has been made; enough for them to feel secure to invite him into their company and not send him off alone into the night. Hospitality now enters their relationship.

#### The Guest Becomes the Host

He takes them up on it. He becomes their guest. He stays with them. Then they do the best thing people can do to get to know one another. They share a meal together. How many problems could be solved in this world if we could just sit down and share some food more often. Never underestimate the power of people eating together. And in this meal in today's story something extraordinary happens:

*When Jesus is at the table with them, he takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them.*

We have heard these words before. We know this sequence, this is a liturgy familiar to us. The two know this as well. They have shared this meal before; and they know the sound of that voice and the way he hands out the bread. Suddenly the guest becomes the host. This is no stranger. It's him! They are in the presence of the Lord.

*Now their eyes are wide open, and they recognize him; and then he vanishes from their sight.*

This is the resurrected Jesus who can show up here, and then there, and then wherever the Spirit leads.

#### Positioning Ourselves in the Presence of the Lord

The good news is God is showing up everywhere all the time. God is alive and present even today. Where and how? and how do we position ourselves for the presence of God? Three things:

God is present in the sacraments of the church. We celebrate two sacraments in our church: Holy Communion and Holy Baptism. In Communion we believe the Spirit of

God is with us in that meal as we share the bread and the cup as a community. In Holy Baptism we are marking the beginning of a person's spiritual journey. In the passage Mary read from the book of Acts, we hear that Peter preached on the day of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit fell on the crowd and three thousand people believed and were baptized. In today's baptism we recited what we believe in the liturgy, joining the centuries of voices who have said the same things at each baptism. When Gennaro pours the water into the basin, God shows up. When I trace the sign of the cross on Sebastian's forehead, God shows up.

God is present in the reading and hearing of Holy Scripture. If you read what is in this book and let it sink into your deepest parts, I assure you your life will change as a result of that encounter with God.

And God is present in the encounter with the stranger. Do you recognize Jesus in the stranger? The one you don't know; the one who is different than you. Invite him in before he passes by.

This is how the story ends: After Jesus vanishes from their sight the two say to each other,

*"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"*

*That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.*

*They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"*

*Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

So, take every opportunity to participate in the sacraments of the Church. God is showing up in these moments. Read and listen to the Holy Scriptures. God is showing up in the Word. And by all means, engage the stranger, make a connection, and practice hospitality. This is especially where God is showing up.

Keep your eyes wide open. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, and the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives, God is now showing up everywhere and all the time. Amen.