

## RECOGNIZING JESUS

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

After my daughter graduated from college, she worked for a time at a Seattle's Best Coffee shop in downtown Seattle. She got there one morning to discover that their regular coffeemaker was broken, which is a problem in a coffee shop. She was struggling to make coffee by hand, pouring hot water through the grounds in a filter, when a customer came up to the counter. Glancing at the customer, she waved her hand and said, "I'll be right with you," and she scrambled to finish brewing a pot of coffee. At that point one of her co-workers jumped forward and said to the customer, "I ... I ... I'll help you," and she sold the customer a drink from the espresso machine that was still working. As he left, the coworker grabbed my daughter and said, "Laura, do you know who that was?" My daughter shook her head. "Harrison Ford!"

My daughter is quite a movie fan. How could she not recognize Harrison Ford when he was standing right in front of her? Well, it is easy. Just ask the disciples. The disciples did not recognize the risen Jesus when he was standing right beside them. The Bible says, "They were kept from recognizing him." The Bible does not say what kept them from recognizing him, but I have a good idea. I think they were distracted from recognizing Jesus, just as my daughter was distracted from recognizing Harrison Ford. The disciples were caught up in their own worries and disappointment. Their master, the one they so fervently cheered on Palm Sunday, was dead. Not just dead, but executed as a criminal. And God did nothing to save him. And now his body was missing. They could not even put flowers on his grave. The disciples are puzzled and heartsick. You can hear their disappointment when they tell the stranger about Jesus. They say, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." We had hoped! Those are the words of shattered expectations.

The irony is that twice earlier in the gospel of Luke, Jesus told his disciples plainly that he was going to be arrested, executed and on the third day rise from the dead. Jesus told them these things ahead of time. But Luke says, "They did not grasp what was said" (Luke 18:34). Apparently the disciples had their own expectations for Jesus. They were expecting Jesus to seize power and launch a rebellion against the Romans. At the last supper the disciples argued about which of them would be the greatest in Jesus' kingdom. Despite what Jesus told them, the disciples were not expecting Jesus to die, and when he did, they certainly did not expect to see him alive again.

But finally the disciples' eyes are opened, and they recognize him. What happened? What finally helped them to see that Jesus is alive, and not just alive but present in their here and now? What opened their eyes?

According to this scripture passage, three things happened. First, the disciples had the Bible explained to them over again. In verse 27 Luke says, "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."

I am sure the disciples thought they already understood the Bible. They had gone to Synagogue School. They had been taught Bible verses as children. They knew all about the

Messiah. They knew that the Messiah was the promised king who would defeat their enemies and make them a free and powerful nation. But that picture of the Messiah did not include being put to death on a cross.

To understand the cross, they needed to have the Bible explained to them over again, and that is what Jesus did on their walk to Emmaus. Jesus reminded them of Bible verses to which they had not paid enough attention in Sunday School, verses like Isaiah 53:5: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” Or these verses from Psalm 118: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” Jesus had to explain to them what these verses meant: that the Messiah would have to suffer and die for people’s sin before God raised him to life. They had to go back to Sunday School and learn more about the Bible and about Jesus before they could understand how Jesus was present in their lives today.

One of the interesting patterns I have noticed in people who join our church, especially young families, is that people often come back to church for the sake of their children. The typical story goes something like this. A person grows up going to church as a child, but when he goes away to college, he decides to sleep in on Sunday morning. He figures he has heard it all before. But when he graduates from college and gets married, and when they have children, suddenly they think, “Maybe we better go to church so our children can learn about God.”

I am all for this. Don’t get me wrong. If people figure out that their children are not going to learn about God at school or at soccer practice or from playing video games and that they better bring them to church, that is great! But there is a slight flaw in reasoning. There is a subtle assumption that our children need to learn about God, but not us adults. We adults think we already know everything we need to know about God and Jesus. We learned it in Sunday School or Confirmation class 20 years ago.

The problem is that if your picture of Jesus is 20 years old, you won’t recognize him when he shows up. If you have not learned anything new about Jesus for 20 years, you won’t recognize how he is working in your life right now, or how he would like to work in your life if you give him the chance. The first thing that opened the disciples’ eyes to Jesus’ presence in their lives was going back to Sunday School and studying the Bible over again. The first step in recognizing Jesus is to reacquaint yourself with the scriptures that tell us about him.

The second thing that opened their eyes was giving hospitality to a stranger. It is easy to look down on the disciples for being a little thick-headed, a little blind. But you know what impresses me? These disciples invited a stranger to have dinner with them even before they knew it was Jesus. They offered hospitality to a person in need they did not even know, only to discover later that this person was none other than Jesus.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a parable where a king says to his followers, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick

and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” His followers are shocked. They say, “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick and do something to try to help you? We don’t remember doing that.” Then the king answers, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:34-40).

How did the disciples have their eyes opened to see Jesus? First, they went back to Sunday School and studied the Bible again. Second, they offered hospitality to a stranger in need, only to discover later that the stranger was Jesus.

The third thing that opened their eyes was what happened that night at the table. In verse 30 Luke says, “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” Does that sound familiar? Those are exactly the actions Jesus did three nights earlier at the Last Supper. He took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you.” In effect, Jesus shared communion with them, and when he did, their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

The point is not that Jesus is present only in communion or only in church. Quite the contrary. Jesus had been walking beside the disciples all along; they just did not know it. They realized it 1) when they went back to studying the Bible, 2) when they helped a stranger and discovered they were helping Jesus, and 3) when they celebrated communion and discovered that Jesus was the unrecognized host at the table.

Unfortunately there have been and will be times in your life when Jesus seems far away. There will be times when you are just as sad as those disciples on the road to Emmaus—times when someone you love is taken away, times when your hopes and dreams are shattered, times when the cruelty, injustice, and suffering of the world will overwhelm you, and you will say, “We had hoped . . . we had hoped that life would be better than this.” At those moments you may not see Jesus or feel his presence, but you will discover he is there, if you have learned to recognize him.

- Ken Onstot