

Seeing Jesus
Luke 24:13-35
West Valley Presbyterian Church
April 16, 2023

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1. Jesus' followers started out by seeing him in the usual way, with their physical eyes. And that worked fine for the 33 years or so that he shared this planet with us. But Jesus' resurrection changed things, as we talked about last week. This 4-dimensional world (three spatial dimensions plus time) could no longer hold him, since he now lives in all dimensions, beyond what earthly life can contain. He knew that in 10 days' time he would be ascending into heaven. So in the meantime, he connected with many different people as possible. Including two broken-hearted followers going home to Emmaus.

2. Now these two weren't members of the inner circle. They weren't famous. Cleopas is mentioned only twice in Scripture: here, and in the gospel of John, as the husband – with his name spelled differently - of one of the three women who were all named Mary, standing at the foot of Jesus' cross. Probably then, the unnamed person along with Cleopas in Luke's gospel is his wife Mary. But it's hard to say, since this is the only story in Scripture about them. They were just regular folks who loved Jesus - just like us - and were broken hearted over his death. Here is their story.

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

¹⁹ "What things?" he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

²⁵ He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Here ends the reading of God’s holy word. (Thanks be to God.)

3. In many ways, the story of Cleopas and his wife is our story too.

4. Why didn’t they recognize Jesus when they saw him on the road, and talked with him? In other resurrection appearances, sometimes Jesus’ followers did a double take. It took them a minute or two to realize that the man they were seeing was really Jesus. After his resurrection, he was still Jesus, but different from how he had been during his life on earth. So why didn’t Cleopas and his wife also do a double take, and say, “It’s you! Jesus!” and fall down at his feet? Luke says that it was because “they were kept from recognizing him”, presumably by God. But why would God have done that? Because God wanted to give to them the way of recognizing Jesus, that all of us regular folks would be using after Jesus’ ascension into heaven.

5. So, what’s the first thing Jesus does? He comes alongside them while they are on the road. In their case they are heading back to their home in Emmaus. In our case, we’re usually not actually walking along a road to get somewhere; we’re usually driving. But we do still think of being “on the road”

metaphorically. Like, we're walking along the road of life, for example. I really like the idea of Jesus walking alongside me as I journey through life, don't you?

First thing Jesus does:

Comes alongside them.

6. And what's the next thing Jesus does? He asks questions, such as, "What are you discussing together?" Now I'm sure he knew perfectly well what Cleopas and his wife had been discussing. But he wanted them to talk to him about what was on their hearts. If they talk to him, then they'll be open to hear his answers. In the same way for us – when we have a problem, God wants us to talk to him about it. Why? Because we're not open to hearing God's answer, if we haven't first asked him our question, right?

Second thing Jesus does:

Asks questions

7. And then what's the third thing Jesus does? He unpacks Scripture for them to answer their question. What's bothering them is this: They thought Jesus was "the one who was going to redeem Israel." But how could he be the Messiah, if he was crucified? In their way of thinking, Messiahs don't suffer; they lead armies. And if he was crucified, then how can he be alive? So Jesus takes texts from the whole of what we would call the Old Testament, and explains how they apply to him. And this isn't just a lecture. Cleopas and his wife feel their hearts burning within them while Jesus talks with them along the road and opens Scripture to them. The Holy Spirit gives life to Jesus' words, which they take in, and which burn within them.

8. Has that ever happened to you? Maybe something was really bothering you and you weren't sure what to do about it. And then you read, or heard, a passage of Scripture that just seemed to leap out at you and burst into your thoughts. That's why we say that Scripture is the Word of God. Because that happens, regularly, to regular Christians, by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Hebrews 4:12 says, "The word of God is alive and active." That is so true. By the power of the Holy Spirit, it burns within us, the same way that it burned within Cleopas and his wife. That is why all of us are called, as Christians, to read our Bibles, to go to worship and Bible study, and ask questions about things we don't understand.

Third thing Jesus does:

Unpacks Scripture to answer questions

9. And then what's the 4th thing Jesus does? He goes into their home with them. Of course they insisted; that would have been the polite thing to do back then. There were no motels; and once it got dark, a lone traveler would be an easy target for bandits. But since he's Jesus, he could have gone on; he chose not to. He chose to be with them when they invited him in. And in the same way, Jesus chooses to be with us when we invite him in. Wherever we happen to be, we can invite him in. We can invite him into our cars when we're driving, into our homes, into our businesses, into our church. He'll be glad to accept our invitation.

Fourth thing Jesus does:

Goes into their home

10. And what's the 5th thing Jesus does? He sits down at the dinner table, takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to them. Does that remind you of anything? How about when we celebrate the Lord's Supper? Morgan, and I, and every other pastor, always say as part of it, "On the night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take and eat, this is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me"? Luke tells us that when Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them, that their eyes were opened and they recognized him. That fits with my own experience; I am more aware of Jesus' presence during Communion than I am at any other time. God has given us such a gift in that sacrament. We are not able to physically see Jesus, because he is in heaven. But we are able to spiritually see him and recognize his presence with us, through this sacrament.

11. As it was with Cleopas and his wife, so it is with us. Two thousand years later, Jesus is still with us. He still walks with us in our lives' journeys. He still hears us when we're talking to him through prayer; he still speaks to us through his word in Scripture; he still opens our eyes to his presence through the Sacraments. He is right here in this church, right now; he is in all church gatherings in his name, where his people pray and study Scripture and celebrate the Lord's Supper.

12. When churches were closed due to Covid, I found that it was harder to see Jesus. Harder to be aware of him. Of course Rob and I watched worship services on Youtube and did our best to participate. But it wasn't the same. Sitting on our living room couch together and watching church on the TV monitor felt so sad. It felt like a big loss. When we are in church together with our brothers and sisters in Christ, that's when it's easier to feel that God is present. Of course God was with us on our living room couch; Covid is no barrier to God. It's just that we couldn't feel him. It wasn't the same. We need each other. Jesus knows that, so he gave us one another, and gave us prayer and Scripture and Sacraments to share with one another. We need one another to be aware of him in our midst.

13. I know that that's not always possible. I know there are folks who still need to quarantine for health reasons, or who have to work on Sunday morning. So for you who are watching on Livestream, I want you to know that you are not forgotten. We pray for you. We volunteer on the tech team for you. We think of you and we miss you. And we hope and pray that there will soon

come a day when you are able to be present with us in person. To the extent that it is possible, let's continue making the effort to gather in person on Sunday morning to worship. Let's see Jesus, in our midst, together. Let's pray.