

I Saw Him In Church!

Texts: Luke 24:13-35

4/18/10

I

When was the last time you saw the risen Jesus at church? Maybe that seems like a no-brainer. If you can't find him at church where else could you hope to find him?

But think about it for moment. When was the last time you encountered the reality of Christ as you went about the business we call "church"?

I wish I could tell you that every time you open the door you will be bathed in heavenly light. But reality tends to be different – it may just be flickering of an almost burnt out fluorescent bulb. We come expecting a divine encounter only to find all sorts of other distractions. Money has to be allocated, mission priorities have to be discussed, and groups who want the same room at the same time have to negotiate the calendar. And would you believe from time to time people don't see eye to eye on everything from what music we sing to what's for dinner on Wednesday? We thought faith would be a bit more simple and Jesus a bit more obvious. More than a few folks wonder what's going on; you might be one of them.

That's why you won't only find excited people in a church; you'll find discouraged one's too. I hear from them. Maybe the big picture isn't clear. Maybe what they've hoped for spiritually isn't happening.

Today's text has something to say to all of us who don't always see Jesus when we come to church. It's a story about the religious confusion, and disappoint of some believing people and how they got beyond it. This is a story about being in the dark and finishing in the light.

II

**A couple of the followers of Jesus are walking down the road to Emmaus.
And if they ever understood the Jesus thing, they don't now.**

Cleopas and his traveling companion are in the dark. They are so in the dark that when the risen Jesus greets them along the road and starts walking with them, they don't recognize him.

So what are you talking about, he asks. And giving him a look like he must be from Mars they begin to explain to him how all the wheels have come off the Jesus train.

They begin to invite this unknown traveler into their religious confusion. Well there was Jesus, a prophet mighty in word and deed. But the rulers of our people sentenced him death and crucified him. And we had desperately hoped that he could change things; that our lives and the future of Israel would be forever different because of him.

And now it's been three days since all this craziness and some of the women of our group went to the tomb and had a vision of angels who said he was alive. And some of us went to the tomb, which was empty. But there was no Jesus to be seen. (Wouldn't you have loved to see Jesus taking all this in?)

How do you reconcile such potential and such disappointment? What do you make of a dead messiah? What do you do when somebody tells you Jesus is alive, but you can't find him?

In the church faith's potential only makes faith's disappoint that much harder to take. How can there be both in the same church? How can there be both in the same life? What's the point of all this Jesus stuff if the results seem so mixed? We've got two ancient disciples struggling with the darkness and quite a few modern ones as well.

It's dark. And yet Jesus is walking with them in their darkness. Maybe we should at least suggest that he walking with us in ours. Maybe my struggle to see the Lord doesn't mean there isn't a Lord to be seen.

III

At some point Jesus tires of the blindness of his followers and he offers them a handhold in the dark.

It's such an important statement that it needs to be repeated:

“Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (11:26-27)

Wouldn't you have liked a front row seat at that bible study? Recognizing Jesus doesn't happen because you are a smart insightful person. It doesn't even happen because you point your car in the direction of a place we call the church on Sunday morning. It will not happen without an encounter with the revelation we call Scripture, the written word of God.

Recognizing a crucified messiah as a risen Christ doesn't happen apart from the light God reveals in our life through the story that is his Word. And notice that Jesus is talking about what we call the Old Testament. In other words we are invited to seek and find Christ in all the Scriptures, not only the New Testament.

If we're struggling to find Jesus in this confusing reality we call church, we need to remember that one of defining marks of the church is the faithful preaching, singing, studying, and praying of the Scriptures. If that's not near the top of our list we're paying too much attention to non-essential things.

Are you encountering God in Scripture on a regular basis? Helping us to do that is one of the primary reasons this church, any church, should exist. Scripture isn't simply rules or information. Scripture is where God can happen in the church and in our lives. It's a means of grace, an opportunity for God's blessing and presence.

We all need help learning to see Jesus. And when we are indifferent about the role of Scripture in our lives, we have ignored one of the primary ways God chooses to make himself known.

IV

There is more though to seeing Jesus at church than hearing the sermon or opening the Bible. As important as the “good book” is Jesus shows up in other ways as well.

As these disciples walk along with their unknown teacher it becomes late in the day. So they invite him stay with them, to share their table and their fellowship.

When he was at table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

It's so simple and so profound. When we invite each other into our lives, when we break bread, Jesus makes himself known. It sounds like we're talking about having “communion” in this passage, and we probably are. The church is defined by its *sacraments* as much as by its scripture. But it's so much more that communion has come to mean for many of us. For the early Christians communion was a moment in a much larger meal. And every meal was an opportunity for communion with God and hospitality with each other.

C.S. Lewis wrote long ago:

Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbor, he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also, Christ...is truly hidden.

Recognizing the risen Jesus in the church means taking a sacramental moment. Most experiences of God begin as an experience of something else. There is a somewhat mystical dimension to the presence of Christ. He impresses himself on us as he will. And Scripture teaches us that God frequently uses the hospitality of our tables – whether it's the table in our homes, the communion table in this sanctuary, or the table at the end of time in God's kingdom – to make himself known.

Jesus isn't fast food. He comes to his church as we share ourselves across the table of our lives. He shows up in conversation, hospitality, and generosity.

We can see Jesus in the often confusing, sometimes disappointing reality of the church. We can see him as surely as we can see him on the mission field. But seeing him at church has little to do with this institution – its buildings, budgets, or programs. It has everything to do with opening the scriptures, welcoming each other into our lives, and sharing the bread that is on our tables.

V

It seems we've been moving from darkness to light. The two disciples, who could walk for miles with Jesus and never see him, now recognize him for who is. And in flash he disappears from their sight.

But his physical departure was no tragedy because they knew he was alive and how to recognize his presence.

Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? (vs. 32)

How's your heartburn? That may be the greatest gift the church can give its members. Not the kind that results from the drama of running this place. The kind that results when the scriptures are opened to us, hospitality is shown to us, and bread is broken with us.

Were not our hearts burning within us... God is not simply a concept to be learned. He is living presence to be encountered. And even though holy heartburn is a personal experience, it was never meant to be an uncommon one. If we aren't experiencing any it may be we have become distracted from what the church is all about.

VI

The beautiful thing about holy heartburn is that it ends in holy conversation. These two disciples who had gone from darkness to light - who had heard the scriptures, sat in the company of the master, and tasted the bread - hightailed it back to Jerusalem.

They went to church, and sitting among their brothers and sisters they shared their light:

Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread. (vs. 35)

When you see Jesus at church, or anywhere else, you need to tell your brothers and sisters. Most of us spend a lot of time between darkness of Jerusalem and light of Emmaus. We need your help to finish the trip.