

Easter Eyes: Looking at the World Anew ***Seeing***

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Luke 24:1-35

The Second Sunday of Easter

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Scripture Introduction



In Luke's Easter account, all the encounters with the Risen Christ occur on the same day. By the end of that day, Christ will be ascended and the disciples will be in Jerusalem worshipping him. And so it's crucial, quickly, that they remember him correctly and come to understand what his death means. First, the women see angels at the tomb. Then, Peter finds the tomb empty. Then, the two travelling to Emmaus have the first encounter with Jesus. The author of Luke has fun with us recounting the irony in this exchange.

Scripture—Luke 24:1-35

1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

3 but when they went in, they did not find the body.

4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,

7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

8 Then they remembered his words,

9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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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.

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, 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. 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 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.

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32 They said 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?"

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.

* * *

As Jesus begins to make resurrected appearances, beginning with these two, he opens for them an understanding of the scriptures. That is his central focus. He doesn't need them to see him alive again, like he's some sort of miracle. What they need to learn to see is much bigger than that. He needs them to see him in the scriptures and at the table to finally understand. If they see Him, the person; if they see Him, the prophet; if they see Him the healer...they still haven't seen Him. In this final chapter of Luke that takes us from Easter morning to Jesus ascended, Jesus explains twice what the scriptures said about him, first in this passage, and then again, after the two travelers rush back to Jerusalem to share what has just happened. As they're talking, Jesus appears, now with them all, and again explains all that Moses, and the prophets, and the Psalms had written about him. And he "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." Jesus isn't staying with them physically, visibly any longer. Now they need to understand, and to see the spiritual reality in the world, so that they can carry out his mission.

But these two have given up pretty quickly. Overwhelmed by their grief and their disappointment, they depart. They have all the facts, even the empty tomb, but all they can see is that Jesus has been killed, and they don't even have a body anymore. Now no one knows where he is and no one has seen him. They have the facts, but they can't perceive what it means. And that's a pretty dangerous place for Jesus-followers to be at this point. Imagine if they had stayed there....

I remember learning how important our perspective is as I was learning how to drive. New drivers need experience behind the wheel. We can't become comfortable and competent unless we practice. My dad decided that a family camping trip out east, with our pop-up trailer hitched to the back of the car, was as good an opportunity as any for me to get driving experience. He assured me I didn't have to think about the trailer; I was to drive the car just as I normally did and the trailer would just naturally follow along behind. "Sure, if you say so," I said.

At this point, we happened to be going through a stretch of curvy, hilly roads. I can still see one curve to the left, a few cars around the bend. It's one of the scenes that I can recall, I'm not sure why. I was gripping the steering wheel tightly and trying to focus on staying in between the white lines in the lane in front of me as the road kept curving. That's when my dad told me that I needed to look farther ahead, a little around the curve I was heading to. But that didn't make any sense—that it was safer to look ahead and let my eyes naturally pick up what was in-between, than it was to look in front of the vehicle. My instincts took me in the wrong direction; I wanted to look closer rather than farther out. I was trying to focus on the wrong point in the road.

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And that's where the two travelling to Emmaus are focusing, right in front of them. All they can see is Jesus' death. Their brains are processing that information in the ways that they knew. Death had always been final. Death meant grief, and so they were in grief mode. And when we're there, it can make it hard to see everything else at the same time. They were being asked to perceive what didn't make sense, death that didn't mean grief but that meant life, and joy, and triumph. Death that was better for them than having Jesus with them, as Jesus had told them, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:7-8). That's not an easy transition to be able to see. And while they're staring right in front of them, it's nearly impossible. With hands gripping the steering wheel, staring at the road in front of the vehicle, that's all we can see, all we can concentrate on. And taking our eyes off that point doesn't seem to make much sense.

In plenty of moments in this scene, we get to enjoy being able to see while they cannot, as when they say to the stranger with them, "Are you the only one in all of Jerusalem that doesn't know what has taken place?" How in the world could anyone have not heard that news yet, since it's all anyone is talking about? But of course, the one walking with them is actually the only one who really knows what happens and what it means. But as long as they were focused on his death and their disappointed hopes, that's all they can see. As long as they are remembering Jesus as they describe him- *to him*- as a prophet who was mighty in word and deed, if that's who they see, then they can't see him. What they were hoping for was never what Jesus was sent for. As one commentator says, as long as we "remember Jesus as a reputation, a victim, a failure, or a dead man, him you will not see."¹

As much as we want to point out who he is earlier than they understand, we could use the same help. Our statements are just as ridiculous and ironic. Jesus' Spirit is right here, but we don't see. Focused on the wrong things and looking for Jesus' Spirit to come to us in certain ways, in certain forms, we miss where and how the Spirit actually does come. They see him and then he vanishes. We need to learn how to see God's presence and God's kingdom without seeing Jesus.

So, then, the question becomes, how do we see?

The ways our eyes and brains perceive and focus is amazingly sophisticated. We would be continuously overwhelmed and bombarded, and actually entirely unable to function, if our brains couldn't choose to ignore and dismiss the majority of the information around us. Not seeing everything is essential. But it also means that we are constantly choosing what not to see and what not to pay attention to, mostly subconsciously.

Last week, Mark's Easter account sent us back to Galilee to see the Risen Jesus again where it all started. To go back and read Jesus' words again and perceive what we didn't see the first time. So that's where we're heading in the weeks to come. But today, how do we see?

¹ Shea, John. "On Earth as it is in Heaven: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers." 3rd Sunday of Easter, Luke 24:13-35.

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I became aware of Abraham Joshua Heschel in seminary. As a Jewish scholar, he made his lifelong focus the study of the prophets. He could see them and see the world differently than most. If we could point to one theme of his life and his writing, it would probably be indifference. The prophets did not grow indifferent, but felt the divine pathos of God. Thus when Heschel sees an act of evil, he tries to not become accommodated to it. "I don't accommodate myself to the violence that goes on everywhere; I'm still surprised". He doesn't grow used to it, doesn't get desensitized to it. And that's how he could be against evil and keep hoping against it. He said, "We need to learn how to be surprised. Not to adjust ourselves to [evil]. I am the most maladjusted person in society." This is seeing the world differently. That's how a Jewish Rabbi came to be walking side by side with Martin Luther King Jr. in the Selma march, saying that he felt like his legs were praying.²

It was another quote of his that has stuck with me; he said that we need to "learn to know what we see rather than see what we know." This is how Heschel helps us to think about our challenge of being able to see, especially to see spiritually. He says that usually we come to a situation and we interpret the new experiences that we have through our past experiences. In our "conventional seeing," we bring to the new all the frameworks that we have used to understand our world to that point. But that means our seeing is full of knowing. We bring what we know and have a hard time not seeing before us what we already know. Our sight is infused with our knowing instead of "feeling painfully our lack of knowing what we see." "The principle to be kept in mind," according to Heschel, is "to know what we see rather than see what we know."³ Jesus didn't want them to see Him, but to learn how to see God's presence in the world.

From all the constructs that the two heading to Emmaus had before this moment with Jesus, the primary was that death was final, death led to grief. Their moment of being able to perceive who Jesus is comes as Jesus interprets the scriptures for them and then, in the moment when he, their guest, joins them at the table, takes the loaf of bread, blesses it, and breaks it, and gives it to them. And then they remember:

That's funny, this is familiar. A few days ago, Jesus had taken bread and blessed and broken it and gave it to us. And he had said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Oh, right, in his body and in his blood. That's what he meant. Wait he's not dead, he's here. Oh!

And then he's gone. They see, and then he disappears. Can we see, even though he's no longer here?

How? As the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus joins us in our reading of the scriptures, and as we come to the table, and today as we come to this water baptizing eight children, seeing who they are and who we are. As we trust that it actually is a lot easier and a lot safer not to look at the road right in front of us, but to lift up our eyes and look further ahead, we get a different and bigger perspective, even if it doesn't make sense, it actually does make is easier to drive.

² Tippett, Krista. "On Being: The Spiritual Audacity of Abraham Joshua Heschel'", Dec. 6, 2012.

³ Heschel, Abraham J. "The Prophets." 1962. Introduction, xxiv-xxv.