

## Open Eyes

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
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*Easter 3 – Year A*

Luke 24:13-35



I walk into the large room, filled end to end with round tables, almost all of them encircled with people talking, eating, laughing. Some of them look up as I walk by, acknowledging me with a head nod (or are they sizing me up?). I walk in and around the tables, get a plastic tray from the stack next to the doors leading into the smaller room where the food is served, and get in line. No one spoke to me. Everyone was focused on their own conversations with friends. I was new.

I got my comfort food – hamburger and fries – and went back out into the larger room with all the tables, a decision looming. Where to sit? I feel too self-conscious in the moment to just go and sit at a table with an existing group. My heart is beating faster now, and then I see what I realize I had been praying for since I walked into the cafeteria – an empty table. I make my way toward it.

There's no better metaphor for the Christian walk of faith than the middle school cafeteria. Every year, the Confirmation students hear some variation of it. We read the prophet Micah say, "What does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?" What does that look like in the middle school cafeteria? Or we read portions of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says turn the other cheek, or give the shirt off your back, or walk the extra mile, and we will wonder together how this might be enacted at those tables at school.

Our Confirmation students read the Gospel of Luke together with their Covenant Partners for the nine months of the program. By now they have finished it, and, I'm sure have noticed that Luke is all about the table. It is hard to get through a chapter in Luke that doesn't involve a meal at which Jesus is the center – welcoming, challenging, teaching. Janelle, our Director of Youth Ministries, designed an excellent curriculum for the youth centered on these stories of Jesus at table. So much of his most profound teaching came with the sounds of the kitchen in the background, the tearing of bread, the sipping of wine.

We should not be surprised then to come to the end of this table-centered gospel and find, yet again, bread and wine, and Jesus at the center. But this is no ordinary story – in many ways it seems quite odd.

Emmaus is a town biblical scholars and historians have had trouble locating. Cleopas is a disciple whose name is mentioned only once in all the scripture, right here. Jesus is a mysterious figure who appears suddenly on the road, but their eyes are *kept* from recognizing him. After they share their story of lost hope, of a crucified leader and rumors of resurrection – which they clearly are not taking all that seriously – the mysterious stranger begins teaching them from the Hebrew scriptures, reminding them of their stories, and that their own prophets had said the Messiah would not be known by his strength as the world construes it, but his suffering.

The entire time he is talking, their hearts are stirred, their hope is awakening, and all they know is that they do not want this stranger to leave. They extend hospitality to him, they invite him into their home, to sit at their table. And it is this act of hospitality, their response to his words, that creates the opportunity.

He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes are opened, and they recognize him.

“It is the presence of Christ at a table opened to a stranger which transforms an ordinary supper into a sacramental meal.”

The strangest part of this story is what happens after their eyes are opened. “He vanished from their sight.”

But his vanishing doesn’t seem to matter. They run back to Jerusalem. It is as if they know now in ways more deeply than ever that he is seen at table, in the breaking of the bread, and that no matter where they go, he will be present to them.

This odd story is beginning to make sense. It is less about what happens to Cleopas and his fellow traveler than what happens to all of us, to the church, down through the ages. You expect Jesus to appear to the eleven. But Cleopas and his companion are unknowns, nobodies really, who have no idea what God might be doing. They could be any one of us. Their road to Emmaus is an ordinary road each of us is on every day. This is how *we* experience Christ. Not as someone far off in time, but present to us, as near as our next breath, as near as the bread and wine. Every table, every relationship, every circumstance is teeming with the presence of Christ.

“The table is an image of a God that walks alongside human confusion, human pain, and human loss of faith and hope. The table invites us to expect God to find us. The table challenges us to see that it isn’t our unshakeable faith and deep spirituality that connect us with the risen Christ, but our smallest gestures of hospitality and friendship.”

I was walking toward that empty table, when I heard a voice behind me. “Do you want to join us?”

I politely declined. “Your table is full.”

“There’s always room for one more.” A couple of folks slid their chairs and created room. Everyone started introducing themselves. Turns out most of them were new too.

This was three years ago, at Austin Seminary, all of us new doctoral students, and all of us now as close as if we’d been friends since middle school.

And it happened again and again. We would be laughing, talking about a recent class, making plans for later, and someone would make his way across the dining hall with that telltale look, and soon enough we were sliding around, making space, always room for one more. That’s why Mike Moyers’s painting in the Narthex speaks to me so profoundly – it captures this experience, this metaphor that is so much more than a metaphor, but a sign. There is always room. Repeatedly at those tables, our eyes were opened, and we recognized him.

In Confirmation, the students explore lots of topics – Bible, the creeds and confessions, the sacraments, what it means to be a member of the church – all of it important. But humming beneath each of those topics, humming beneath the life of this faith community, is an invitation to see, to see Christ at whatever table we find ourselves – the middle school cafeteria, or the grown-up one; the political table, the family table, the work table, the table filled with strangers, the table filled with friends. Christ is there. That’s what this story reveals. He is there, always, waiting to be seen and followed.

The students are invited to look for his merciful, peaceful, welcoming, loving presence every day, in every circumstance. It is an invitation for us all.

Having spent time with these students and read their faith statements, I know they have each seen him, and today as they commit to following him, may we provide our prayers and our example as we walk alongside them, following the One who has opened our eyes. Amen.