Luke 24: 13-35

The Thin Veil

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When Elvis Presley died in 1977 there were sightings. People were convinced they saw him alive at Graceland, at the Memphis Airport, at Legoland in California and even in the background in the movie “Home Alone”. Now I know I’m on the thinnest of ice when I begin a sermon on the resurrection stories of Jesus with a comparison to the sightings of Elvis. But let me be clear, I’m not suggesting it is the same. Not for a minute would I tell you that Elvis has very much in common with Jesus Christ, but I believe these stories in the Bible are so hard to imagine that we grasp for any kind of modern examples, however bizarre. The thing that really distinguish the two experiences is that Elvis’ fans (they weren’t disciples) were looking for him. Often, they were obsessed with find him alive. But Jesus’ disciples were always confused, incredulous and baffled to find him. When he showed up in near the tomb Mary thought he was the gardener. When he came to the Upper Room Thomas couldn’t believe it. When he appeared on the beach while they were fishing, the disciples squinted at him in disbelief before the truth set in. He surprised them. Here, on the road to Emmaus Jesus talked to them for a couple of hours before they recognized Him. We have to assume that he did not look outwardly like Jesus but his essence was there. Each encounter had a fleeting quality. Once they knew him, he disappeared.

It makes you wonder why. Why did Jesus keep popping up in these confusing disguises? Why come at all? What the point was of these stories? What can we learn from them today? Let’s take a closer look.

In the first place, the Bible says Jesus is always closer than you think.in our story, some disciples left Jerusalem in haste and confusion to walk to Emmaus. They met a stranger on the road talked to him about the crucifixion. They shared their grief and told him how confusing it was to learn their rabbi’s tomb was empty. The stranger might have kept walking but they invited him to supper. When he broke the bread that night something tipped them off, a gesture, a pattern of speech the way he used his hands. Something small but telling, made them realize who this was.

The bible says that Jesus is as close as a stranger who meets you on the road of life. Jesus is as close as the voices next to you who join you in the Lord’s Prayer. He is as close as the friends who listen to your hard sadness. He is there when you confess your deepest fears. You and I will never meet Jesus in Galilee. We’ll never lay eyes on the man with the robes and dusty sandals. That ship has sailed. But the story says he is closer than you think. He is there in the silence of the north woods when you imagine you are alone. He is there in the loon’s song when you find your spirit drenched in wonder. He’s there when a child looks up at you with trusting eyes.

The ancient Celts talked about thin places, in life where you could feel the power or presence of the sacred. But Luke says you don’t have to go to a particular space in the woods. You might be walking down the road, or stuck in traffic and feel Christ’s presence come upon you. You could be sitting down to supper, or serving a meal and suddenly realize you have stepped on to holy ground.

Many artists have been painted this moment, trying to capture this thin moment on canvas. Rembrandt paints the disciples in shock and disbelief as their eyes are opened to the knowledge that Jesus is there at the table too. My favorite of these paintings was the one done by Diego Velazquez. It’s printed on page 6 of your bulletin, and it is called “*Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus.”*  The scene focusses on the woman who has served the meal. You have to look over her shoulder to see Jesus and the disciples. Her head is tilted to the side, as she listens to their voices, and ponders what she is hearing. There in the clutter of bowls and dishes you realize she is riveted by an awareness that something is happening she cannot comprehend or contain. Velazquez understands that when you step onto holy ground somehow the moment breaks in around you in the midst of the bowls and dishes, and your laptop. When you have a visit from Christ Jesus, you never know enough. You are left wondering. Was that what I thought it was? You are left re-living the whole experience. Were not our hearts warmed when he talked about scripture? He’s stealth in all the best ways and warms your heart even before you head catches on. The maid’s face says it all. He leaves you vulnerable, peaceful, curious.

It can happen when you give birth or when you hold a hand in hospice. It can happen at a baptism when you forget the liturgy because something suddenly takes your breath away. It can happen when you believe in a dream and pursue it against all odds. It can happen when you feel called to something new and Jesus joins you on that road. He shows up because he’s always closer than you think.

In the second place, Jesus says here, my work is not done. I need you to continue. On Easter Mary tells the disciples she’s seen Jesus alive, but they don’t believe her. That afternoon, the two disciples in our story leave town. They high tail it out of there back to Galilee. Cleopas and the other disciples are sure the ministry is over. He’s dead. Without him, their work is done. Jesus goes after Cleopas on the road. He pursue these defectors. He tells his death was not the end of anything. It was just the beginning. I still need you. There is so much work to do. I need disciples to heal the sick, to invite the outcast, to advocate for the prisoner, to include the poor.

When you graduate from high school or college you think the best days are behind you but everyone says. This is the beginning of the rest of your life, the start of a new chapter. But when you are young in life or in faith it takes time to see that. So many familiar things are over, you cannot see the way ahead.

That’s how we treat Easter. It makes us nervous to imagine that Jesus has left us in charge of things. So we wrap Easter into a tidy package, a day of candy, fancy moments and festivity. Jesus comes to Emmaus to us here and says, my life and ministry was never meant to be a one-off, a blip on the screen of time. It was the start of the something new in the history of the world. Jesus tell his disciples then and now He needs us. He needs us to do the work he started every day of our lives too. Since Easter Sunday one month ago in our country we have witnessed five mass shootings – in a bank, a back yard a home, a medical office and a dance studio. Christ’s work is not done. Since Easter 50,000 people are being held in solitary confinement in US prisons. Christ’s work is not done. In the weeks since Easter nine million kids have gone to bed hungry. His work is not done.

When Jesus chased Cleopas and the other disciples that afternoon, he said, Don’t walk away. I need each of you to put your shoulder to the wheel. That is exactly what his followers did. They did not have a manual for changing the world any more than we do. But they went out and began the work. They fed the hungry. They organized clothing drives. They visited the lepers. Before long the Roman world took notice of them because they led with love. When they met at tables no one sat at the head. No one was noticed for their class or gender or ability. They faced the future together.

Finally, Jesus says, let me feed you for your journey. Just as the disciples were inspired at a table in Emmaus we come to this table today to re-fuel our spirits to go out and make the world better than we found it.

I watched the King Charles coronation yesterday. I was impressed by the religious symbolism in that event. At the most solemn moment in the ceremony we saw a man stripped of his robes, go behind a screen to be anointed. The archbishop of Canterbury put oil on his head and chest and he used olive oil from Jerusalem, in a 3000 year old tradition dating to the anointing of King Solomon of Israel in the Bible. The symbol here as it was in the Bible tells us that the power to rule comes from God. Without God’s blessing we cannot possible accept the responsibility. Then King Charles took communion reminding him he’d need to feed his soul for the work ahead. Finally, I learned that in the United Kingdom Monday will be a national day of service when millions of volunteers will begin Charles new reign by serving others.

When Jesus broke the bread at the supper at Emmaus it was more than an aha moment. It was a call to action. It was a meal where those disciples re-turned to their mission. It was the moment when they saw that now they were the hands and feet of the resurrection story. Jesus Christ needed them. We are Easter people too. Easter is not a day but a way of life.

Announcements

Welcome to worship at the church of the open Door. Welcome whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey. Welcome in person and online. Let’s wave to the congregation online and pick up the pew pads. Please pick up a copy of the May Newsletter or look for it online.

Welcome to Communion Servers – Carol and Ralph DiBiasio Snyder, Derek Elkins and Peggy O’Connor. Derek is the Chaplain at St. Norberts, and in discernment for ordination in the UCC.

Review Communion –

Next Sunday you won’t want to miss worshipas we have wonderful music at the centerpiece of worship. -Five Mystical Songs by Ralph Vaughn Williams.

Mary Sullivan will introduce our speaker for 11 a.m. the Director of the Samaritan Counselling Center Roseangela Berbert.