



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
30 April 2017
Sermon: "Seeing is Believing"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19
Luke 24:13-35

"How is this night different from other nights?"

Growing up in an interfaith home, with a Jewish father and Presbyterian mother, the Easter season was always coupled with the cherished Jewish holiday of Passover.

As many of you know, Passover is a time to sit at table with loved ones and share an evening meal where we ask questions and remember the Exodus story: when God freed the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, where they had been held captive for nearly five hundred years. It is a time to give thanks for the sweet gift of freedom today and declare our commitment to helping bring about freedom for all people throughout the world.

During the Seder, there are a number of cherished rituals: such as dipping bitter herbs into salt water to represent the bitterness of slavery, dripping drops of wine on our plates to acknowledge with broken hearts the ten plagues the Egyptians endured, and retelling the story of how God appeared to Moses in the most unexpected form of a burning bush: telling him to lead the Hebrew people out of bondage and across the sea - to a new beginning.

As is tradition, the Passover table always includes a place setting for the ancient prophet Elijah (remember, he's the one who never died, but was instead whisked away into heaven). At the Seder, Elijah always gets his own chair, his own cup, and towards the end of the evening, someone is sent to open the front door - to "welcome him in".

Well, a few years back, my sister and I were given the honor of opening the door for Elijah. We rushed out of our seats, turned the knob and swung it open. We then shrieked in unison and jumped about five feet in the air.

Before us was Elijah. Standing tall, with a white cotton ball beard, wrapped in badge bedsheets and holding a long curtain rod staff.

When our eyes regained focus and the laughter surrounding us died down a bit, we realized that it was in fact our neighbor Ben playing a "harmless" trick on us.

But the lesson of it all - felt more significant than meets the eye.
Every year, we had been opening the door for this prophet,
and every year we never really expected him to show up.
Why would we?

~

We spend much of our life, arguably all of our time here in church, seeking out God.
Yearning for the Divine to show up – somehow, someday;
mysteriously be revealed to us in the midst of a frustrating morning commute,
or in the calm of that familiar church pew,
in the whisper of the cool mountain breeze just after daybreak,
Or in the creaking of the ol' house late at night when all are asleep.

We spend much of our life, practicing holding fast to the hope that just down the road,
just past the next hill, the next hurdle - Jesus will really show up.

Yet as I look around the room today, I wonder, even in our most wholehearted, faithful
anticipation, are we really expecting to see Jesus at the door? And when he does appear, do
we have the capacity to recognize him, the trust to welcome him in, the authentic faith to
permit him to guide us down an unfamiliar - even treacherous path?

~

The two disciples had no idea what they were getting into that day on the road to Emmaus.

We know for sure, they were in mourning– their hands and hearts still trembling from the
gruesome murder they had witnessed a few days earlier. Their friend, rabbi, holy prophet,
who they believed was the One sent by God to bring redemption to all of Israel was gone –
crucified. Certainly, their hope of liberation and renewal had died with him.

Sure, some of their friends had said “he is risen”, “he can’t be gone” “Look, he’s not in the
tomb”– but the two had not seen ‘Jesus risen’ for themselves - and as much as they wanted
to keep up the faith – to believe in what he had promised them – they still couldn’t wrap
their minds around something so “impossible”.

And so, they left. Emmaus was not a very prominent destination. It was just a simple
village. They were going home – the place we all go when we are feeling lost and defeated,
when we need time to recharge, and heal, and figure out our next steps.

They probably did expect to bump into some familiar faces along the way.
Perhaps on this stretch of seven miles they anticipated running into some old cousins who
they hadn’t seen for years, or maybe they feared encountering Roman soldiers looking to
capture any remaining Christ followers. They expected to see anyone else than the one they
longed most to see. And so, when Jesus shows up – miraculously standing before them in
his risen body – ‘their eyes are kept from recognizing him.’

The text doesn't tell us why.
Is it God who restrains their vision?
Has Jesus changed his look all that much?
Are they blinded by their broken hearts?
Have they isolated themselves too much from their community of believers?
Or is this the Gospel writer, Luke's attempt to reprimand any of us who ever waivered in faith?

Whatever it is, surely, we know what it is like to feel that blinded,
when the roads of our lives are filled with so many jarring twists and turns:
headlines that shatter the heart,
diagnoses that changes everything,
lives cut short by violence,
relationships that can't be mended back together,
periods of loneliness that cripple our souls,
generations of prejudice that weaken our society...

We know the Road to Emmaus is a story about us;
about the ways we are blinded by our sorrows -
unable to recognize Christ's features,
unable to make room for amazing grace,
unable to see God's hands at work in the world,
unable to really expect that liberation from pain can be right in front us.

UCC minister, Shannon Pater puts it this way: "This story bids us to look deeply into ourselves; the road leading away from the holy city is ours. The soles of our shoes know the brokenhearted steps of a road away from an unrecognized resurrection."

~

One of this year's Oscar nominated films, Hidden Figures tells the tale of three African American women, Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson and Dorothy Vaughn who were integral to NASA's many triumphs in the 1960s. But these three female engineers of color, like many others, were kept out of our history books.

During the film, NASA is in the midst of their race to the moon. Everyone is putting in overtime - trying to uncover those hidden math figures that could mean a successful launch. Katherine's boss, Al sternly says,

"What I am asking you and everyone to do is to look beyond the numbers, look around them, through them, for answers to questions we don't even know to ask, math that doesn't yet exist. Because without it we are not going anywhere. We are staying on the ground, we are not flying into space, we are not circling the earth, and we certainly are not touching the moon."

A few months later, Katherine is on her tippy toes scribbling equations late at night on a chalkboard with her colleagues. Finally, Al begins to wonder if maybe they have been thinking about this all wrong – maybe it’s not new math at all.

“It could be old math.” Katherine responds, “Something that looks like the problem numerically and not theoretically. Math is always dependable.” Her face lights up “Eulers’ Method.”

“But that’s ancient!” shouts her colleague, Paul.

“But it works.” She says with a smile.

Katherine and her colleagues had spent months of sleepless nights in search of something that had always been there - something that wasn’t new at all, but was ancient, and timeless, and dependable, and staring them right in the face. They needed to only open their eyes and recognize it.

~

Friends that day on the road, the two disciples encounter One who is timeless – their Savior who had and would always be there for them. He walks ahead of them, but they stop to welcome him in (as he had taught them to do with strangers).

Standing at table beside them, Jesus the Christ meets them in their brokenness, by severing bread in two – just as he did at the Passover meal days earlier.

It is all like he promised – he meets his beloved again “in the breaking of the bread” and this holy sacrament nurses their broken souls back to health.

Their aching faith is met with new-found courage.

Their broken hearts suddenly burn bright.

Their eyes are opened – and they recognize him.

It is Christ, in the flesh, alive, resurrected, here – all along.

And so too, God meets us here, again and again – in our brokenness, in our blindness. As Calvin writes, it is here at this table where we connect to the ancient Hebrew scriptures that speak of the sweetness of Exodus freedom AND it is here where we connect, through the power of the Holy Spirit, with the Living Christ who comes to set us free.ⁱ

Just like the disciples that day, we cannot keep such good news to ourselves. The hope of resurrection must be shared with one another in community, for together we can bear one another’s burdens, together we can welcome each other in, together we can help one another’s eyes be opened to a God who transforms, who redeems, who stands before us - no matter how hard or difficult it is to see.

~

For the past four months, eleven of our Grace Covenant youth have been walking the path of Confirmation. They have been on a “faith quest” together (as we call it) thinking deeply about what it means to be a part of this church, they have been searching for answers about who God is and how Christ is working in their lives.

They have shared communion with ordinary coke and donuts.
They have visited Ebenezer Baptist Church and Congregation Beth Ha Tephila.
They have been surrounded by community: parents engaging their questions, teachers pushing them further, mentors listening to their worries, and a congregation that has been loving and nurturing them all along.

Next week, a number of them will become Confirmed members of our church, and ALL of them will continue to be sacred baptized members of this community.

During one of our class sessions a few weeks back, Marcia came to visit with us and she asked our young people, “What are some the central beliefs of the Presbyterian church?” One of our youth raised his hand high and said,

“That you are welcome as you are.”

...that you are welcome as you are: a simple and holy message of hospitality that we can surely strive to embody as disciples of the One who finds us, welcomes us, right now, as we are. And the One who leads us down a path more wondrous and fulfilling than our imaginations can possibly conjure.

~

Friends, I wonder what your Emmaus road looks like.
Where are the weary parts of your life that feel un-mendable?

The Emmaus story is our story
because it promises that Easter meets us not in our perfection, but in our brokenness.
Here on this road, no matter how deep our wounds, no matter how weary our feet, no matter how lonely the journey has been, and no matter how hard we have been searching, our eyes need not look any further.

Jesus is already here among us – not past the next hill or the next hurdle, not on the other side of the door – but right here, right now, whether we are able to recognize him or not.

Jesus is here, promising to walk alongside us, or even a step ahead – clearing the path for a new way of being faithful disciples together in the world.

It isn't also easy to keep our eyes in focus, to keep our senses aware.
Life is filled with its share of roadblocks and heartbreak – that is for sure.
But we've got to put ourselves on the road:
to be truthful about our shared vulnerability,
to express our need for God and for one another,
because it is then, when the Spirit equips us
to taste and see a glimpse of collective resurrection hope -
standing here before us.

Friends, Christ welcomes us in right now, as we are.
And in the breaking of the bread,
Christ offers to bring us back to community –
back to one another,
back to wholeness,
back to faith, back to life.
God is here, ready to open our eyes
And when we do – we will be changed.

© Copyright Rev.Samantha Gonzalez-Block, 2016.

ⁱ Rice and Huffstutler, *Reformed Worship* (Louisville: Geneva Press) 2001, p. 66