

He Will Be Seen – Kent Dunnington

Luke 24:36-48

Christ is risen.

“He is risen indeed.”

This is the third Sunday of Easter. Easter morning is behind us, but it is still Easter.

It was Easter evening, and we were all there. There with the eleven remaining disciples in that house in Jerusalem. They had invited us; some of us were their friends. Do you remember? There was a buzz in the air. They were trying to get caught up on everything that had happened.

They were all shuttling from group to group trying to sort things out. In one huddle someone said, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon.” We looked around for Simon Peter. He was there, pressed into a corner, talking rapidly, with his eyes bulging and his hands moving wildly. As we were trying to move closer to Peter, two others burst into the room, out of breath. “We have just seen him,” they said. “On the way to Emmaus. He is alive!” It had been loud before; now the room was in an uproar.

Please stand for the rest of the story...

Luke 24: 36-48: “While they were talking about this...”

We were there for it. We saw it all happen. Do you remember? I remember. I remember your astonishment. And, I remember your confusion. Here’s some of what I overheard you saying later that evening:

“Why didn’t we recognize him?”

“Why didn’t the *eleven* recognize him?”

“Why didn’t Peter recognize him? Peter supposedly saw him this morning. Yet Peter looked as terrified as the rest of us.”

“Why didn’t those *two from Emmaus* recognize him? They had just seen him!”

“He said this was the fulfillment of scripture!? I’ve read the scriptures backwards and forwards: law, prophets, Psalms. This isn’t in there! Nowhere in our scriptures does it say that a messiah will suffer and rise from the dead in three days. Nowhere! What was he talking about—*‘thus it is written’?*”

“To what, exactly, are we supposed to be witnesses anyway? The unannounced appearance of an unrecognizable man in fulfillment of non-existent scriptures?”

Happy Easter!

The more I read the gospels, the more I am convinced that this would have been our conversation. We would not have recognized him. Nor would we have been able to explain why he should have been recognizable. Oh, people have tried. Have you ever heard someone suggest that the Jews should have known Jesus was the messiah because it was foretold in the scriptures? I’m sorry, but I just don’t see it. I would have been on the side of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. It was they who knew the scriptures inside and out, backwards and forwards, and they said: “this doesn’t fit the bill.” They were right! You could have asked them to make 1,000 predictions about the future of Israel, based on careful reading of scripture, and a crucified and resurrected Messiah would never have made the list. Never. The resurrection of a crucified rabbi was simply not within any available framework for understanding God’s ways in the world.

All of this should make us uncomfortable. Because we are church people. We also have scriptures. More particularly, we are Protestant Christians, which means we are sola scriptura people, “scripture alone!” The Bible is supposed to tell us everything we need to know about God’s ways in the world. It is supposed to be “authoritative for all things unto salvation.”

But the disciples too were the people of God. They were temple people. The disciples had the law and the prophets—they had the scriptures, which they too took to be authoritative for all things unto salvation. And there they were, in the presence of the risen Lord—in the very presence of their salvation—and they could not see him. If we are to trust what the Bible actually says, sola scriptura won’t cut it, because sola scriptura can’t even ensure that you recognize Jesus when he is in your midst.

What the Bible actually says is that if you start with the Bible and try to get to Jesus you will never make it. No, you have to start with Jesus and then turn back to the Bible. “Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” Unless Jesus is already among us, we read the scriptures in vain. Unless Jesus is among us, scripture will only mislead. Even worse, scripture may lead us to crucify precisely that which is holy in our midst.

But Jesus is among us. That is the good news of Easter. We are not left alone with our Bibles to formulate and codify systems that will comfort us in the absence of God. No! God is really among us! All of our doctrines, all of our creeds, all of our scripture are nothing if not a series of

reminders that God is among us. The Good News of Easter is that God may be among us even when we think he is not. Put differently, the Good News of Easter is that we may very well be mistaken about whether or not Jesus is in our midst. So rejoice!

Even when our theology makes it hard for us to recognize God—God is with us.

Even when our churches make it hard for us to recognize God—God is with us.

Even when our reading of scripture makes it hard for us to recognize God—God is with us.

Even when the boundaries of our communities make it hard for us to recognize God—God is with us.

And he will be seen, sooner or later. Perhaps the lesson of Easter is that we should be eager to admit that we have been mistaken about where God is and is not present in our midst. “In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering,” says verse 41. That is the Easter outlook: we cannot yet recognize you in our midst, Jesus, but we joyfully await as you open our minds.

The Easter outlook is something that theologian James Alison calls “the joy of being wrong.” I try to encourage this attitude in my students. They are often afraid to speak in class. They are afraid that I will argue with them and that, since I am the expert, they will lose and be humiliated. But I try to suggest that it is an accomplishment to lose an argument, for only when you are at ease losing an argument are you in a position to learn. What could be so bad about losing an argument, I ask? You’re just a human being. Whenever I go to an academic conference and I start to fear that everyone is smarter than me, I go out of my way to ask a really basic question like, “Who’s Plato?” Well, probably not that basic, but I really do try to make it clear, mainly for myself, that I have nothing to prove. That is the Easter outlook: the joy of being wrong. Jesus will come among us, and we will not recognize him. But if we stick around, he will open our minds.

Maybe that’s why I love Peter so much. He was wrong about Jesus so many times that he learned the joy of being wrong. Peter became an expert at being wrong to the glory of God. You remember that Peter was there that Easter evening with us. He had just seen Jesus that morning but couldn’t recognize him that evening. Jesus said, “Peter, you are my witness.” And so, several weeks later, Peter was walking to the temple with John. Outside the temple lay a beggar who had been lame from birth. This beggar had been sitting outside the temple for years, but he could not come inside for he was unclean, he was unholy, God was not present to him. Or so everyone thought. And as they went up to the temple, this lame beggar asked Peter and John for some spare change. This was not the first time Peter had seen this man. Peter too had walked past him hundreds of times. But on this day, something changed. Peter experienced the joy of being wrong. I love what the text says here. The text says that “Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, ‘Look at us’” (Acts 3:4). They looked intently at him! No one had done that for years.

At that moment, Peter saw Jesus in that man. Because remember, Jesus had appeared to all of us wounded and hungry. We touched his wounds and we gave him some fish to eat. And Peter suddenly got it! Here is Jesus, lame and hungry! And Peter said, "I have been wrong about you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (3:7). And the beggar jumped up and began to walk, and he entered the temple with Peter and John.

And all who were in the temple were astonished. Some were outraged. What is the meaning of this?! And Peter began to speak. Here is the gospel preached in miniature, in our reading from Acts for today:

"Why do you wonder at this, you Israelites? We did not heal this man. God did. This God was among you. But just as you could not recognize this beggar as a child of God, neither could you recognize Jesus as God come near. So you rejected Jesus, you killed Jesus. We rejected him, we killed him. I rejected him, I killed him. But God raised him from the dead. I know it, because I saw it. Repent and come join us as we try to follow this living Jesus wherever he leads."

This is the gospel. Jesus is with us; the kingdom of God is come near. And boy, were there ever surprises in store for those who followed!

Who would have guessed that Philip would have to look intently at an Ethiopian eunuch before he could recognize Jesus?

Who would have guessed that Peter would have to look intently at a Roman centurion before he could recognize Jesus?

Who would have guessed that Jewish Christians would have to look intently at us, filthy Gentiles, before they could recognize Jesus?

Who would have guessed that patriarchal Christian men would have to look intently at Christian women before they could recognize Jesus?

Who would have guessed that racist white Christians would have to look intently at black Christian slaves before they could recognize Jesus?

Who would have guessed that Protestant Christians would have to look intently at Catholic Christians before they could recognize Jesus?

And the story isn't over yet. Jesus is among us. If we stick around, he will open our eyes to understand the scriptures. Praise be to the risen Lord. Amen.