

**April 15, 2018 “Making Space: A Stranger’s Mercy”
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore**

**Luke 24:13-32
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair**

It has always struck me as remarkable that when the writers of the four gospels come to the most important part of the story they have to tell, they tell it in whispers. The part I’m referring to, of course, is about the resurrection. The Jesus who they knew was dead isn’t dead anymore. He is risen. He is here.



I have to echo what the author Frederick Buechner has noticed about the Gospels, that there were no choirs of angels to proclaim it. There were no sudden bright and blinding explosions of galaxies in the night sky. Not a single person was around to see it happen; to see the stone roll away. When Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb afterward, she thought at first it must be a gardener that was standing in the shadows, and when she saw who it really was and tried to embrace him, he told her not to, as if for fear that once she held him she would never let him go; the way I suspect that you or I would never be able to let go of the image of one who was dead, now come back to full and healthy life, much less Jesus himself in the flesh.

When the disciples heard he was alive again, they tended to dismiss it as too good to be true, and even when they finally saw for themselves, Thomas wasn’t convinced until Jesus let him touch him with his own hands. Later on, when they were fishing at daybreak, they saw him standing on the beach, and there again they failed to recognize him until he asked them to come join him by the charcoal fire he had started on the sand and began to cook them breakfast.

The way the Gospel writers tell it, in other words, Jesus came back from the dead not in a blaze of glory, but more like a candle flame in the dark, flickering first in this place, and then in that place, and then, oddly, flickering in the hearts of those who followed and believed in him.

If they had been making the whole thing up for the purpose of converting the world, presumably they would have described it more the way the book of Revelation describes how he will come back at the end of time, with ‘armies of heaven arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, and his eyes like a flame of fire and on his head many diadems’ (Rev. 19:14,12).

But that's not the way the Gospels tell it. They are not trying to describe it as convincingly as they can. They are trying to describe it as truthfully as they can.

It was the most extraordinary thing they believed ever happened, and yet they tell it so quietly that you have to lean close to be sure you hear what they are saying. They tell it as softly as a secret, as something so precious and holy, fragile and unbelievable and true, that to tell it any other way would somehow dishonor it.

To proclaim the resurrection the way the Gospel writers do, you would have to say it in whispers: "Christ is risen." Like that.

Down through the centuries the Christian church has not really proclaimed it that way. Easter comes to us with more than a shout than a whisper, and no one is to be blamed for this at all. It was the Apostle Paul who was blunt enough to come straight out and write to the Corinthians, "If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14). So when churches all over the world proclaim that Christ has been raised indeed and death has been vanquished, they naturally do so at the top of their lungs and with all their banners flying. The scent of lilies fills the air. A full choir sings Bach, or Handel. Easter bonnets adorn a few inspired heads. The pews are packed.

It can be a very powerful and beautiful occasion announcing that even in a mad and murderous world like ours, which no longer seems to believe in much of anything, there are still people around who seem to believe that this miracle of all miracles took place, or at least they long to believe it, at least believe that it is of all miracles the one that would be most wonderful to believe if only they could.

But the shadow side of the great Easter celebration is that sometimes the very fanfare and festival of it all are apt to leave us feeling like the only guests of a great New Year's Eve party who are not having the time of our lives.

All the wonderful things that are going on around us on Easter Sunday can sometimes make us more conscious than usual that nothing even close to all that wonderful is happening inside ourselves.

That is why the Sundays after Easter are so precious, because in their comparatively subdued and low-key way, they seem not only closer to how the resurrection actually took place as the Gospels describe it, but more important still, closer to the reality of the resurrection as you and I are apt to experience it.

These post-Easter Sundays without all the special flowers and trumpets and crowds are like the kind of day that Luke describes in his account of the two disciples on their walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus, some seven miles away.

They had heard the women's report about finding the tomb of Jesus empty in the morning, but as Luke writes "it seemed to them an idle tale", and they did not believe them. They didn't believe what the women said because it seemed simply unbelievable, and then as they trudged along with evening approaching and the sun starting to set, Jesus himself, fully risen and alive again- joined them on their way, only they did not know it was Jesus because, again as Luke puts it "their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

I have to think that these are the most haunting words of this Emmaus story, because they remind me so much of my own eyes and I suspect may also remind you of yours- eyes that look out at this world we live in but, more often than not, see everything except what matters most... those things that get in the way of our seeing what's really going on, and allowing ourselves to be moved by it.

These past few days have been blessedly beautiful, weather-wise, and I hope you've been able to get out for a few walks. I've taken a few strolls in my neighborhood; Aigburth Manor, behind Towson High- along that nice little woody path & then up through Stoneleigh and Wiltondale.

It's absolutely gorgeous; but then, this time of year- after the long gray winter we've had- we're all ready for some color and warmth; for our skin to feel the sun and our eyes to see signs of new life underfoot; to witness the silent rising of the jonquils and hyacinths, forsythia, daisies and snowbells- and dozens and dozens of flowers with names I don't know. What I come away with after every stroll is how simply beautiful it all is, and amazing, that what for months and months has been underground and unseen emerges new and beautiful; that from a dry and dormant bulb in the earth- such wondrous creations emerge.

Now that's not all to conflate the cycles of nature with the power of the resurrection, but it is helpful as a way to recognize the power of what eyes can see.

What strikes me as especially revealing and important in this Emmaus story is what Cleopas and his friend (whoever he or she was), were looking for, and what they were not; and I don't think they were alone in their expectations at all. They are the tip of the iceberg of the early Christian community. What they discovered was that their eyes were prevented from seeing

Jesus because he appeared in a way they simply didn't expect- walking with them, talking with them as normal as ever. This was just all too normal for it to be Jesus.

They had been following the story line that expected Jesus to redeem Israel from suffering; that he wouldn't be crucified and buried, much less rise from the dead in such a normal and inconspicuous way.

As they walked and talked, it came to them that the story was unfolding that Jesus would redeem Israel through suffering, not deliver them from it; that life and death were part of the same package, and that being part of a community faithful to God's ever-faithful presence was a necessary, and not optional connecting link. In that conversation Cleopas and his friend became self-aware, recognizing the times and places in their lives when they were part of something much bigger than themselves, but also much better, more caring, more in touch with God's purposes than they ever could have been on their own.

Becoming self-aware of their past, the way they followed Jesus in his ministry of teaching and healing, of miracles by the sea, of weddings and banquets and gatherings, their eyes were opened in recognition of what they were being asked to do once again; this time without his presence, but in his name.

As Fred Buechner wrote: it doesn't take choirs of angels to proclaim Jesus' life with us, nor bursting galaxies in the night sky. (I don't really know how much of a difference they would make for us anyway.) Although the two disciples **did not** recognize Jesus on



the road to Emmaus, Jesus recognized them, and he saw them as if they were the only two people in the world.

In this fragile world where you and I see so little because of our unrecognizing eyes, Jesus- always, and in all ways, sees each one of us as a child cherished by God. And because of this, not even in the darkness of death are we lost to him or lost to each other. Whether we recognize him or not, or believe in him or not, or even know his name, again and again he comes and walks a little way with us along whatever road we're following.

And through something that happens to us, or something we see, or somebody we know - who can ever guess how or when or where? - Jesus offers us, the way he did at Emmaus, a listening ear, a word of hope, a new vision of peace that this fragile world cannot bring.

This is the message of Easter that continues to come to us when we pay attention- opening our eyes to the people and needs around us, a holy presence that flickers among us like a candle; precious and vulnerable, illuminating our way, filling our hearts and drawing us ever nearer to Jesus and to each other. Amen