

Not Just Another Pretty Face
Luke 24:13-35 and 1 Corinthians 15:19-26
© Stacey Steck
Preached April 4, 2010 at San José, Costa Rica

I've seen the face of Jesus a lot this week. I mean, a lot. He seems to particularly like revealing himself on channels six and seven during Holy Week. Funny though, he never looks the same twice. Sometimes he is blond and blue eyed, and other times he is dark eyed and olive skinned. Either way, he is always pretty good looking. I like what he says, but it's a little disconcerting to watch him speak because his voice never seems to correspond with the movement of his lips. And he speaks pretty good Spanish for a guy from the Holy Land. Yes, the face of Jesus is everywhere. But do we really see him?

Those two disciples on the road obviously didn't watch enough Holy Week TV to know how different Jesus can look in all his disguises, so of course they didn't recognize him until he was just about gone. For the hours they must have spent together, they saw only a stranger, a welcome stranger, an interesting stranger, but a stranger nonetheless, one who at first seemed ignorant, perhaps a traveler passing through who had been blissfully ignorant of all that had transpired, but who later seemed to be have something to say when, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." As we read, it was not until Jesus had taken, blessed, broken, and given

them the bread that they finally figured out, or had it revealed to them, just whom they were dealing with. And then, of course, he was gone.

Throughout the centuries, the faithful have debated whether Cleopas and his companion were simply so fearful, depressed, or in a hurry that they did not recognize Jesus, or whether Jesus was wearing a hood until he sat down to dinner, or whether they were spiritually blind to him until that moment when in the breaking of the bread they recalled the feeding of the five thousand, or whether, simply according to God's mysterious purposes, Jesus' identity was divinely kept from them until just the right moment, the moment they were really, truly ready to see him. I suppose the reason doesn't really matter as long as they did see the risen Christ, the face of the one whom God used as a witness of both the limits of death, and the power of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of us. In Luke's Gospel, Cleopas and companion are actually the first people to witness the risen Jesus. The women, and Peter, see the empty tomb, but that is all they see, although when Cleopas and companion get to Jerusalem, they hear the story of Jesus appearing to Simon Peter, even if we don't get to read the actual report of that meeting. But these two receive an extraordinary blessing for being in the right place at the right time on the road to Emmaus, even if the blessing was not to last very long.

Even though we don't know for sure why, I choose to believe that Cleopas and his companion did not recognize Jesus for another, more significant reason. It

is because they could not see him in his resurrection body, the new creation that came with God doing a new thing in defeating death. You may remember that I mentioned this idea a few weeks ago when talking about what Paul writes about resurrection in First Corinthians, that although we really have absolutely no way to know what our resurrected bodies will look like, we can be assured that just as our current bodies are appropriate to this creation, our resurrected bodies will be appropriate for the new creation when Christ comes again. The perishable bodies we walk around in now are not suitable for the footpaths of the imperishable creation of the future. The eyes through which we see now are not able to focus on the New Jerusalem. The ears we currently use to hear are not tuned into the heavenly choirs. It will simply be different; it has to be. These bodies don't last forever, but God is eternal and we have been promised eternity. And so it is that we will receive just the right resurrection body, and it will make all the sense in the world to us then, even if it is a mystery now.

Cleopas and his companion begin their journey to Emmaus with old creation eyes. Even if they had been looking for Jesus, they wouldn't have found him with those eyes, for those eyes could only see the old Jesus. When they do "see" him, it is not because they recognize the face, but because, by God's mysterious grace, they get a test drive of their new creation eyes, and with those eyes, they perceive not only the man, the teacher, the friend, and the prophet, but also the very son of God, the one who made their hearts burn within them. Among all the other

wonderful things to remember about Easter, and what it means, there is also this: that Jesus' resurrection is a foretaste of our own, and that every so often, that resurrection, that new creation, breaks into our old reality, surprises us with a gracious glimpse into our future, and allows us to recognize things we never could have imagined otherwise. At that table in Emmaus, the disciples recognize more than just another familiar or pretty face. They now recognize compassion when they see it. They recognize hope. They recognize love. Perhaps they recognize each other as the adopted children of God. They certainly recognize their lives will never be the same. May that be true for us as well.

Maybe you are beginning to see why it is not a great leap to go from talking about eyes to talking about faith. Cleopas and companion know a lot about Jesus, they are able to say to him on the road, that "he was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." They have faith, these two, to be sure, but they have not yet experienced resurrection faith, the kind that comes with meeting the risen Christ face to face, or hearing about him from someone who has. Before their encounter with Christ, they could see enough to walk the road to Emmaus, even enough to see something unique and extraordinary about Jesus, but suddenly at the table, it is as if they have just had spiritual laser eye surgery and can see everything in full focus now. Their vision problems are over; they can see even into the divine realm. There he is; it's him! But just as quickly as they see, their new vision fails them. Jesus has vanished once again, they see him no more, and

they are left alone once again. But this time, they are not left in despair. They have received a gift, the gift of a pair of spiritual eyeglasses, so to speak, a gift for the rest of their lives of a resurrection faith, a way to improve their vision. From that point on, they may not be able to see Jesus in his resurrection body, but they do see the world differently. You see, new creation eyes are the eyes for our future, but we get an occasional unveiling in the here and now. In between those wonderful occasions, what we get is a resurrection faith that transforms us and the world.

So what is a resurrection faith? Well, let's look at it in terms of our story. Let me suggest that faith, even ardent faith, makes us willing to follow someone in his or her presence. People followed Jesus because he touched them, healed them, taught them, fed them. They had faith in him, because of what they had witnessed. But how many of them had resurrection faith? You see, resurrection faith compels us to follow someone in his or her absence. The Romans knew how quickly an enraged mob disperses once their leader is gone. That's why they killed Jesus, to defuse the tensions they believed he had created, and to scatter his followers. They believed, and perhaps rightly so, that all Jesus' followers had was faith. And that kind of faith would have limited power to hold that group together in Jesus' absence. What they didn't count on was that God provided a resurrection faith that would sustain them, and us, until Jesus returns. What they didn't count on was the resurrection that made his absence meaningless, for the promise of his presence in the future.

What is resurrection faith? Perhaps it is that faith that does not depend on mountaintop experiences of the closeness of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Our resurrection faith sustains us even when it seems Christ is absent, and does not allow us to abandon hope simply because we do not experience Christ's presence as we once did, or as we may hope we will again soon. We see this in the disciples who recognized Jesus at the table but didn't stop believing when he vanished. We have no way of knowing what kind of future they had been planning before they met up with Jesus, but it is not hard to imagine it was a life not unlike the one they had before they became his disciples, perhaps on slightly better behavior, but more or less the same. But instead, they return to Jerusalem to tell their story, changed people, even though Jesus had vanished from their sight. They no longer need to see him to follow him.

What is resurrection faith? It is a faith that reorders your priorities, that puts into new perspective the things you see every day. One day, you see poverty as human laziness. The next day you see it as the visitation of the sins of the many on the life of the few, on the single mother and her children. One day you see addiction as moral failure. The next day you see it as bondage, the genesis of which is completely unimportant. One day you see yourself in the mirror and think, what point is there in living? The next day you look in that same mirror and think, what divine mischief is God going to involve me in today? One day, all you can think about is loving yourself, and getting the love you need. The next day, all you

can think about is loving everyone else, and giving the love you have received.

That is a resurrection faith.

I want to conclude with one final thought about what we see with a resurrection faith. In speaking about the vanishing Christ, theologian Ronald Goetz writes this: he says, “Human love, which gives existence its viability and purpose - - both our love of God and our love of neighbor -- is spontaneous, fragile and fleeting. Like the heavenly manna of the Exodus, love cannot be preserved and stored. We cannot manage it. We can only hope that it will be there for us when we most need it.” That sounds pretty depressing really, that we cannot count on love being there when we need it. Right? But he goes on to say, “These ought not to be melancholy thoughts, any more than the two disciples should have lamented the vanishing of the risen Christ. We know that Christ’s vanishing and the vanishing of every human moment, and the self we are at every moment, serve to underscore the utter preciousness of life. This simply makes more glorious the mystery that this precious life, which we presently experience as so poignantly fragile, is, like the God who gives it, eternal.”

God is eternal, we have been given eternal life through Jesus Christ, and we can see that clearly now. Thanks be to God. Amen.