

Sermon “Aha Moments”

Kirk of St James

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I am not a gambler, and I have known that truth since my days travelling on school bus #24. The other teens used to play cards for quarters and loonies and that was simply too much money. While other children on the playground were growing their pog empires, trying to flip cardboard discs with their larger slammers I kept mine carefully counted in a Ziploc bag—I couldn’t stand the thought of losing one. The closest I come to gambling is occasionally buying a ticket for the weekly Tuesday goldrush draw because at a home and school meeting they mentioned it could make a huge difference for the school. As someone who is risk averse, I only tend to do things if I have been able to research thoroughly, have an idea of predicted outcomes or problems that could arise, and if failure isn’t going to cost anything too precious.

However, I have long admired people who are not afraid of change and making large decisions. Taking a risk on a new job, or who have an idea and are willing to jump to try and make it work. We often hear stories in media about A list stars who spent months living in a car and scraping by until they get their first big role and everything changes. For example, who would have thought that the fourth child (out of twelve) born in a small one room cabin in Tennessee, with a love for music would go on to sell over 100 million records, countless philanthropic efforts including a deep commitment to literacy for children, among numerous other accomplishments? Any guesses? Dolly Parton.

Well, today in Luke we start out on the road to Emmaus with a couple of Jesus’ disciples. They had bet everything in their lives on this man they believed was the Messiah, they had left behinds livelihoods, family, and homes to follow after their teacher, and the bet hadn’t paid off. Instead of a triumphant conqueror they witnessed Jesus being crucified and then his broken body taken down from the cross, wrapped, and placed in a tomb. Some of the women had reported that very morning that when they went to the tomb to prepare the body it was gone, and two men in shining clothes told them Jesus has been raised. While in Matthew there are additional details Luke simply records that, “They said this to the apostles; and this message seemed to them stupid, useless, and they didn’t believe them. Peter, though, got up and ran to

the tomb. He stooped down and saw only the graveclothes. He went back home, perplexed at what had happened.”

Putting Luke into context no one had yet witnessed the risen Lord. They knew the tomb was empty, but they did not know anything more than what the women claimed. So now, two of Jesus’ followers are walking back to Emmaus discussing and arguing about what is going on. Maybe you have experienced something similar with a friend or partner, you get together over coffee or maybe a long car ride, and you talk about a substantial matter. You are examining different angles and describing your experiences and sharing your thoughts trying to make a situation make sense. That is what they are doing, they are trying to piece everything in this confusing situation together. Did they miss something? How did that happen again? What did he say? What did the women say happened at the tomb? I picture it a bit like podcasts today where you take an issue or event and turn it over and over looking at it from all angles. In the middle of this conversation a stranger randomly pops up and starts to ask them what they are discussing.

During the conversation that follows one of the biggest questions is, “why did they not recognize Jesus?” There have been a lot of mental gymnastics done around why this might be so, with one person going so far as to suggest that the town was in a certain place, and if they are walking this time of day, they are walking into the sun, and it is so bright it prevents them from recognizing Jesus. We don’t know why they do not recognize him, and we likely will not find out that answer until the Good Lord calls us home ourselves. One thought I will offer though, is they know how broken and bloody the body of Jesus was after the cross, and I suspect that even if they had believed Jesus to have risen from the dead, they would expect to see the widespread damage done to his body as still being evident.

This initial encounter also begins the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension and there are a number of encounters with the disciples where Jesus is being recorded as doing specific things, for example he eats fish, and he tells Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands. While these things may seem like small insignificant details, they are also proving Jesus is not a ghost, vision, or even hallucination. This resurrection is about something more

than a vision, or a dream, it is about a resurrected body, and it is different from when Lazarus was raised from the dead.

Jesus' question "what are you discussing" on the road hits the disciples so hard they physically stop walking. Their grief and confusion stop them in their tracks while they try to sum up everything that has happened—where would you even begin? What follows, is the risen Christ explaining to them what they were unable to see and understand. I read an excellent reflection this week on bewilderment and the Emmaus Road, and I would like to share a little of it with you, it said:

"In our lives, we do not often receive bewilderment as a gift. When we see it in a story, we can appreciate it, knowing the character is about to discover something new, something they hadn't understood before. But in our own lives, the bewildering moments can feel so disorienting. We had staked our lives on a certain way of seeing the world, a certain perspective, and now that has been pulled out from under us in some way. God isn't acting how we were taught, or our life is unfolding so very differently than we had anticipated, expected, even hoped.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus are another example after Christ's death (and resurrection...!) of the bewildering disappointment when the story takes an entirely unexpected turn—our leader has died, and we don't know how to process it all. "We had hoped," they say, naming their desire for the long-hoped-for revolution and freeing of God's people from under the thumb of Rome. But the story didn't go how they expected, how it seemed to them to be going until that point, and now they are bewildered. Talking through it on the road, hoping to make sense of it all.

Jesus joins them and listens in to their bewilderment. Hears their "we had hoped..." and helps them see more of the story than they had understood. Now they are bewildered by their hearts burning at a "stranger's" words, by it suddenly being an ALIVE JESUS breaking bread with them, by his sudden disappearance. What is

happening? These last bewilderments may be confusing, but they also carry some joy at the reality of the story unfolding for them.

Often, when we are feeling lost, disoriented, wondering how our faith can come back from some deep disappointment, we don't realize the goodness of being met by the unpredictable that initiated that process. We feel it as disruptive and would rather not. The stories we tell are so ingrained, we feel completely off-kilter when some aspect of them is called into question by our actual experience."

For so long people had waited for a Messiah who would deliver Israel from suffering, instead they needed to learn that it was actually a story about being redeemed through suffering—the suffering of Christ. Ultimately their invitation to a stranger to join them for a meal becomes a moment when through the blessing, breaking and sharing of bread they once again recognize their friend and teacher. A moment when something familiar was seen through new eyes. This whole account is about when there is an inbreaking of the holy into the human. When people barreling down one road are suddenly brought up short and forced to consider things in a new light. We too can find ourselves on the road to Emmaus, trapped in one way of thinking, and unable to see another. The same can be true of churches.

One question I came across in my commentaries this week asked the question, what if "God's word interrupted the church's idle conversations and effectively called a halt to our frantic forward momentum?" I believe we see these things happen all around us. Times when churches get it right, when they speak truth to power, when they help address a need in the community, when they love beyond imagining. Emmaus welcomes us into these experiences where we catch a glimpse of why we do what we do. For example, after a long meeting about an outreach event, and even though there are logistics and expenses and things to figure out we see the person across from us clearly and we are reminded that we do what we do in Jesus' name. These aha moments in our own faith lives and the church at large are a gift from God that helps us remember whose we are, and who we do things for. May we always have the eyes to see.