

Series: Lessons from the Common Lectionary
Title: The God Who Meets Us Where We Are
Text: Luke 24:13-35

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, May 8, 2011
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Several years ago, at this very time of the year, Cherie and I were in Miami, Florida. Cherie was there attending a professional meeting, and I was along for the sights and sounds of a place we had never seen before. We had gone a few days early for some personal time before her conference, and on Saturday we wanted to go to South Beach because we had heard so much about it. It was an incredibly beautiful day. The sun was shining. The temperature was about 85 degrees. The water was warm and crystal clear. It was right after Easter, and a very hectic Lenten season, so it was good to be away and to have some time to reconnect with one another.

We had arrived around 10:30 in the morning, and had rented two lounge chairs for \$15 each because we had not brought all our usual beach paraphernalia with us on the plane. We were some of the first people on the beach, but soon others began arriving.

I had my head in a book when Cherie poked me and said, “There are an unusual number of good looking men on this beach. I looked around, but that is not what caught my eye. There about 20 yards from us were two beautiful women without a stitch of clothing on. You see unbeknownst to us, we had chosen the beach that was known to the locals as the gay beach as well as the clothing optional beach. We didn’t know what to do, but we had already paid \$30 for the lounge chairs, so we decided to stay.

It was a busy Saturday on South Beach. People from all over the world were there. At least six different languages were being spoken. Suddenly a strange figure appeared. He was dressed in a costume which seemed as if it came from the pages of the New Testament (a robe and a head covering), and in a lilting tenor voice he sang:

Abide with me: fast flows the eventide
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, Lord, abide with me

For a moment the noisy beach was quiet as this tender man in costume gave his witness. Was he crazy? Was he some kind of religious fanatic? What was he doing on a crowded beach, in a Middle Eastern costume, singing an English hymn? He didn't give us any literature or attempt to talk to us about his faith. He sang us a song, a beautiful song, and then, as quickly as he came, he was gone.

Cherie and I were quiet for a few minutes, and then a long conversation followed about our discomfort with this simple witness to the risen Christ. We didn't speak to him. We barely looked at him. There on the beach in a very secular city, a place where we did not expect it, we encountered Jesus, and we felt uncomfortable.

MEETS US WHERE WE ARE

The biblical story I have just read you is the story of two men whom Jesus took by surprise and caused them to feel uncomfortable, as well. It is the story of two men, followers of Jesus, who were walking to their home about seven miles from Jerusalem, talking about the events surrounding the death of Jesus. It was Sunday morning, and at this point only a few people knew about His resurrection. For these followers of Jesus, there was nothing but grief; grief over the loss of a friend and the loss of a dream. *"We were hoping that he was the one who was going to rescue Israel! We were hoping, but now he is dead. We were hoping, but now we know. He was only a man, and men alone cannot overcome the power of Rome. But we had hoped; oh how we had hoped!"*

You may know someone who is like one of those disciples; someone who wants to believe in the power of God but who has wound up being disappointed; someone who wants to follow Jesus, but is disappointed because he doesn't quite live up to their expectations of who he is and how he should behave. We know people like that, don't we? Maybe you have been with people like that at some point in your faith journey. I know I have been.

If you know someone who is like one of those disciples, perhaps it behooves you to take a lesson from their experience with Jesus. He begins by meeting them where they are and helping them to translate all that has happened into language they can understand.

This morning's lesson tells us that when Jesus met these disciples, he did not chastise them for their lack of faith. He let them share their story, their disappointment, their shattered hope. He walked

with them in the midst of their despair. Isn't that the way with God? Isn't that why some people get angry with God? They want to believe in a God who will protect them from the painful and the difficult in life, and they discover that God is not like that. Sometimes the best God can do is to walk with us in the midst of the painful circumstances that life brings our way until we discover for ourselves that the thing we long for the most is right there with us: His Presence!!

My mentor in preaching, Dr. Tom Long, tells of his experience with a couple in their 70's who had attended a conference where he was speaking. They told him about one of their sons, a young man in his 30's, who was confined to a nursing home after an automobile accident several years earlier. The accident had left the young man in a permanent coma. The portion of the brain that was damaged was the part that allowed him to communicate. His body functioned, but he was unable to respond to any stimuli.

The father of the young man said to Tom, *"We stopped loving our son. We visited him every week, it was our duty as his parents, but we stopped loving him. Love is a reciprocal relationship, giving and receiving. Our son could neither give nor receive. We went to see him but we had stopped loving him. Until one day when we went to visit our son and were surprised that he already had a visitor in his room. We did not know the man. He was a stranger to us. It turned out that he was the Lutheran minister from down the street who just routinely visited in the nursing home. We waited outside in the hall and we saw this visitor engaged in conversation toward our son, and I thought to myself. 'As if my son could appreciate conversation.'*

Then he took out a Bible and read my son a Psalm, and I thought to myself, 'As if my son could appreciate a Psalm.' And then he prayed a prayer as if my son could appreciate prayer. And then it dawned on me. He does know. Of course he knows. He sees my son not simply through clinical eyes, but through the eyes of faith, and he treats my son as a child of God."

The Road to Emmaus first teaches us that ours is a God who does not judge our faith or lack of it, but is One who meets us where we are and translates the mysteries of faith into language we can understand when the time is right for us.

REVEALS HIMSELF IN THE COMMON THINGS

Second, the road to Emmaus tells us that Jesus reveals himself in the midst of the commonplace if we are open to him. Our lesson tells us that when they came to Emmaus, the disciples invited Jesus to stay for dinner. He was a guest in their home. They invited him to say the blessing. He probably used the Hebrew words familiar to them; words they used every night before they ate their meal: "*Baruch atta Adonai Elohenu*" (*Blessed are you, O Lord, our God*). However, as he said the words, the scripture says, "Their eyes were opened and they recognized him." Jesus had met them where they were, listened to their disappointment, helped them to translate mysteries of faith in language they could understand. Now they were open to the reality of God in their lives, and when we are open to the reality of God in our lives, Jesus is revealed in the midst of the ordinary.

Perhaps some of you have heard the contemporary Native American story called "The Cricket." The story begins with two friends walking down the sidewalk of a busy city street during rush hour. There were all sorts of noises in the city; car horns honking, feet shuffling, people talking! And amid all this noise, one of the friends turned to the other and said, "I hear a cricket."

"No way," her friend responded. "How could you possibly hear a cricket with all of this noise? You must be imagining it. Besides, I've never seen a cricket in the city."

"No really, I do hear a cricket. I'll show you." She stopped for a moment, then led her friend across the street to a big cement planter with a tree in it. Pushing back some leaves she found a little brown cricket. "That's amazing," said her friend. "You must have super human hearing. What's your secret?"

"No, my hearing is just the same as yours. There's no secret," the first woman replied. "Watch, I'll show you." She reached into her pocket, pulled out some loose change, and threw it on the sidewalk. Amid all the noise of the city, everyone within thirty feet turned their head to see where the sound of the money was coming from. "See," she said. "It's all a matter of what you're listening for."

We no longer have a mid-week worship at our church, and I miss it. Our former associate pastor, Tracey Marx, used to lead the service, and I was grateful to just to be there each week as a reminder of the presence of God in the midst of a busy schedule.

There was a section of the service which is called, “God’s footsteps,” and people shared where they have sensed God walking around in their lives. Tracey once told me that the people she asked went from feeling like they had nothing to say to the most touching witness in just 24 hours! She says, “I ask them on Tuesday, usually, and by Wednesday night, they have realized that, sure enough, God’s footsteps are there, right next to them!! All they had to do was take time to notice.”

RENEWS OUR PASSION FOR MINISTRY

The Road to Emmaus teaches us that God meets us where we are and reveals the mysteries of faith in language we can understand when we are ready; and that the presence of Christ is probably easiest to discern in the midst of the commonplace if we will take the time to notice. Finally, it teaches us that the result is a renewed passion for ministry.

The scripture says that when they recognized Jesus, their passion for sharing the good news returned with a vengeance. They ran back to Jerusalem, a seven mile journey. Their exuberance with the disciples was obvious; they simply could not contain themselves. They were compelled to share what they had experienced and what it meant to their lives. This is what happens to people who have experienced the presence of Christ as a reality in their lives. They wind up doing things that would be otherwise uncharacteristic.

As a pastor I get the opportunity to see and hear stories which help me to know that what I have just told you is true. Let me share one with you that came during Holy Week. Many years ago I helped a woman walk through the dark night of her soul; a time when she could not believe in God because she had been abused by a pastor from whom she had sought help. The relationship of trust had been violated, and this woman blamed God for not protecting her.

Walking with her in the midst of her emotional pain, listening to her curse God and not rushing to defend God, was the one of the hardest things I have ever had to do in the ministry.

Shortly after I arrived here in Lancaster, I received a letter from this woman that with the help of a skilled therapist, she had found a way to forgive the man who had betrayed her. Three years later, after many letters and long distance phone calls, she e-mailed me and asked if I would be willing to be a

reference for her application to seminary. *"I know what it is to be angry with God, and I know what it is to forgive and be forgiven. Now I want to learn as much as I can so I can walk with others like you walked with me, and if God can use my experience to help other women in the church, I am ready to share it."*

This is what happens when we God meets us where we are like he met those disciples on the Emmaus Road. When we are ready, 1) Jesus meets us where we are. 2) We see Jesus in the midst of every day things, and 3) our hearts are on fire to share what we have learned with others.