

***The Stranger - Sermon Based on Luke 24:13-35***  
by David Hindman on Sunday, May 8, 2011

On the last Sunday before graduation at William and Mary last year, Wesley Foundation students gave me a variety of gifts, including *Look! It's Jesus*. The back cover has these words, "Jesus...appears to people in the most unlikely places. From grilled cheese sandwiches to frying pans, these 100% authentic visions are surprising and amazing....(reminding) us that miracles can happen at any moment." The book has a somewhat serious tone, including a quote by Thomas Merton wrote, "The whole world is charged with the glory of God." But there are photos of Pierogi Jesus and Cheesus the Cheetos snack in the shape of the savior. So I think maybe some leg pulling is happening, too.

We see what we have been trained or taught to see. I'm told that when Europeans arrived in this part of the world the native population didn't see the ships on the horizon because they had no frame of reference. They didn't see because they didn't know what they were seeing. It's no surprise that visions of the Virgin Mary usually happen to Roman Catholics, not to Buddhists. In a hidden images puzzle, we'd see clearly the letters of our alphabet hidden in the puzzle, but we wouldn't see Chinese characters. We don't know what to look for to solve the puzzle. They might be right in front of us but we wouldn't know what we were seeing.

In the story we just read, Jesus comes near two folks walking on the road to Emmaus and they don't immediately recognize him or understand what's happening. In all the stories of the risen Christ somehow Jesus is the same and somehow different. The New Testament writers fumble for words and images. But they all agree that somehow the risen Christ no longer fits into familiar categories we use to describe those we meet along the way

Or Luke may simply be telling us that they're hindered from seeing because seeing with the eyes of faith is always a gift given to us. If we're able to see the presence and work of God in the world, we should get on our knees in humble thanks to God. Not everyone sees what we do through the eyes of faith, sometimes even when they want to see. Seeing is a gracious gift.

So these two Jesus followers, a man named Cleopas and his wife are heading home from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that first Easter Day. Certainly it's been a confusing, topsy-turvy day. Their hearts have been broken and their hopes crushed on the cross of Jesus. But rumors have begun - Jesus is alive! But no one's actually seen him. And then Jesus comes alongside them, and joins their journey and conversation. This stranger chides their dim-wittedness and lack of faith. As they go he tells them the story of God's ways and how the life and death of Jesus are part of God's eternal plan.

God's love and goodness have always been at work in the world, and that's what's been happening in the Jesus story, too. The stranger invites them to look with fresh eyes at the stories of the scriptures and helps them understand in a new way what was there all along but they just didn't see.

They get home to Emmaus and Jesus seems to be going on when they ask him to stay. You see, Jesus doesn't force himself into anyone's life but is open to our invitation to enter into a deeper connection. Jesus is always ready to stay with us, but he's not pushy especially if he's unwelcome or unwanted. But when he is invited he immediately makes himself at home. Now things take an unexpected turn: this stranger suddenly goes to the head of the table. The guest becomes the host, takes the bread, blesses and breaks it. And in that moment these two suddenly see and understand and he vanishes. That's just right. Our encounters with the presence and power of God are fleeting, beyond our control, out of the corner of our eye, disconcerting experiences of unexpected wonder. "Did you see that? Did I just imagine that?"

Usually God comes at us sidewise, alongside us, from behind. It's often only after the experience that we realize we've been in the presence of the divine. For several years at William and Mary, students gathered weekly for "Witness Group." For an hour they sat together with the simple

question, “Where did you see God at work in your life last week and what do you think God was trying to tell you?” By looking backwards they could see the footprints of God alongside their own. Together as they came to know the story of scripture more fully they received the lens they needed to see the Spirit moving in their lives. Sometimes we miss Christ walking along side us because we’re too busy to notice, or we don’t know God’s ways well enough to see God walking alongside. I’m always troubled and saddened when I see two people sitting across from each other, both busily texting someone else and ignoring the one right there. That can happen with the risen Christ as well, standing right beside us.

The subtleness of God can disappoint us who want razzamatazz encounters with holiness. But this story tells us quite simply that God meets us in surprisingly ordinary ways - at a table, in a stranger, in an everyday walk home, through a conversation telling us of things we might almost have forgotten or had never seen before. Here’s the mystery of the resurrected Christ – he meets us in the stranger, as we break bread together, as we tell a sacred story that puts things in a new light. That’s really all we have as ways to meet the living God – a story, some bread and wine, companions on the way, and daring to believe that it’s Jesus we see in the stranger crossing

paths with us. But for 2000 years they have been enough for Jesus to come near.

There's a plaque by my office door with a quote from St. Benedict, a 6<sup>th</sup> century monk, "All are to be welcomed as Christ." Whoever comes through my door is a gift and an opportunity to see and serve the Lord Jesus, if I have eyes to see. Today Jesus is sitting near you. If we believe that, we don't ignore or look down on each other. God gives us each other for the sheer thrill of serving Christ living in each other! Don't miss that opportunity today or anytime a stranger comes alongside you. It's Jesus in disguise.

What's so awesome about this is that we begin to see all of life as fired with holiness. The Lord's Table reminds us that Christ can be met at any table if we have eyes to see. In her book *Take This Bread* Sara Miles tells about the converting power of Communion. One Sunday she came to Communion as an atheist and left as a believer and felt called to feed hungry people in Jesus' name. So on Fridays at her church hundreds are fed at a food pantry with fresh fruit and produce on the altar so this hunger is fed as well. The risen Jesus does such things when he gets inside us we walk along his way. All life becomes alive with God's presence and power. Roads,

sacred stories, tables, strangers becomes window onto God's mystery and majesty.

Oftentimes in weddings the couple lights a unity candle to celebrate joining their lives. Once I officiated when the couple took that act down a different road. Instead of a plain white candle, the central candle had Christian symbols on it. Lighting that candle with their two smaller candles expressed their desire to have Christ at the center of their marriage and to let Christ be the light guiding them in the future. Each anniversary they light that candle. More importantly when they have conflicts or need to make important decisions they light that candle to remind them that Christ is a welcome guest in their home and sits with them as they pray his guidance to do God's will in their lives. It makes a difference for them. After many years, their hearts still burn with love for each other and for the Christ who is their light and their life.

On the way to our Emmaus, may we keep our eyes open for the stranger who is also our living friend and savior. And because he walks beside us, let us travel the way joyfully always ready to share the good news. Christ is indeed alive. We've seen it ourselves to be true. Thanks be to God!