

Surprised by Grace

Psalm 23 Luke 24:13-35

Use your imagination and picture yourself walking along the road with these disciples...

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' ¹⁹He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' ²⁵Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the

scriptures to us?’³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

This is the word of the Lord.

Peanuts cartoon: Lucy at the Psychiatrist’s “office” (her booth, with a sign: “the doctor is in”), and Charlie Brown has taken his seat there. Lucy says, “Life is like being on a ship, Charlie Brown, and everyone has a deck chair. And there are two kinds of people on the ship. Some people unfold their deck chair in the rear of the ship so they can see where they’ve been. Other people unfold their deck chair at the front of the ship so they can see where they’re going. On the cruise ship of life, Charlie Brown, which way is your deck chair facing?” He thinks about it for a moment and says, “I don’t know; I can never get my deck chair unfolded to begin with.”

First of all, welcome to the fellowship of those who sometimes can’t get their deck chair unfolded!

And... let me play Lucy for a moment and say: Life is like being at a sporting event, and there are two kinds of people at the game: some who leave the game

early when the game isn't close, and those who stay to the end no matter what the score is.

Have any of you ever left a game early (or turned off the tv), when it looked for sure like your team was going to lose, only to find out later that they came back and won? Or am I the only person who has done that? Like I did years ago when our UW Huskies were playing Michigan here at Husky stadium.

In this highly anticipated game, since the Huskies and the Wolverines had developed a bit of a rivalry (now they're in the same conference, which is weird to me), the Huskies were losing 24-10 half way through the 4th quarter, the Huskies had just punted after a terrible offensive series, and my friends and I (and others sitting in the student section) figured the game was over so we decided to leave.

As we walked across the huge Montlake parking lot toward campus, we heard the roar of the crowd, and the siren going off (touchdown!). Then a little further along we heard it again...—a long, sustained roar. Then silence. Then, 30 seconds later, one long, last, loud roar—a sustained roar that lasted for minutes. This was a pre-beast quake type of roar. We hurried back to our house, and turned on the radio to hear the post-game report. We learned that the Huskies made a miraculous comeback and scored two touchdowns, the final one in the

last seconds of the game. And instead of kicking the extra point to tie the game, Don James decided to go for two and... they got it and won the game!... And I missed it! I left the game early, in the middle of the 4th quarter, and missed one of the greatest games in Husky history.

In our account this morning we have the story of two disciples who left the game early so to speak. They were leaving Jerusalem, the city where the great drama of Jesus' last week was played out. They thought their hero was defeated. The horse they bet everything on came up lame. The one they hoped would be the conquering hero was himself conquered, so it seemed. They thought it was all over, so they were getting out of town. And they left because their hopes were dashed. They were in despair. Sad, as Luke puts it.

The good news for them, however, was that, even though they left the game early, Jesus met them on their journey, in their sadness and despair, and they got to experience the grace of God.

And the good news for us is: even if we leave the game early, so to speak—if we have lost hope for whatever reason, and life has left us feeling sad—with Jesus, we can still experience God's grace. We can still make the discovery of his love for us, like these 2 disciples did. In fact, the risen Lord is with you! Always!

It's just that sometimes we, like them, don't recognize him when he appears to us.

The issue isn't whether or not Jesus is present with us; the issue is, can we recognize him? Because, there are some things that can blind a person to hope and possibilities, including the possibility of recognizing Jesus...

Things like skepticism, and cynicism: "Huskies win in the last half of the 4th quarter when they've been playing poorly? Nah. It'll never happen. I'm out." And the good news is that Jesus meets the skeptic in their skepticism, the cynic in their cynicism. The doubter in their doubts. Like Thomas, "doubting Thomas," who said: "Unless I see him and touch him, I won't believe." The good news is, Jesus honored Thomas; and he proved himself to Thomas. Jesus didn't scold him; he honored Thomas.

Jesus honors doubts and questions because they can actually lead us to seeing Jesus more clearly, if we allow Jesus to meet us in them and sincerely work through them.

Yet, true faith is *not* just belief in spite of evidence. It isn't merely an intellectual assent to doctrine, to theological ideas and statements. *Faith is hope*

and trust in God's goodness, in spite of circumstances. Which leads to one other thing that can keep a person from recognizing the risen Christ:

Disappointment. This is what the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were experiencing. They were disappointed. And they were disappointed, largely because they had misguided expectations of who Jesus was and what he had come to do. They expected Jesus to take charge: "We had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel," they said. In other words, they hoped he would re-consolidate Israel as a national and political and military entity, and free them from their enemies. They expected Jesus to be their earthly king and commander in chief. And now he's dead, so they lost hope. And great is their disappointment.

And the first four words of their statement stand out to me, because it's a statement that we all have made, and still make, in our lives: "But we had hoped..." But we had hoped...

In all of the ups and downs of life, we come to know these words: "*But we had hoped...* to raise a family, have a happy life, and then the doctor gave us the diagnosis..."

"But we had hoped... had this great dream, going to do wonderful things, and then I lost my job. And I felt like such a failure."

"But we had hoped... to retire together and enjoy travelling and visiting kids and grandkids. Then the sudden death, and now I'm alone."

"But we had hoped... that we were making progress in securing justice and peace in our world and our society. But then a dictator invades Ukraine, and unelected persons fire people from their jobs and slash needed resources for our health and wellbeing, without reason."

And the temptation is to leave the game early, so to speak. To give up hope. And that's the state of mind and heart these two are in on the road to Emmaus. They're deeply disappointed.

But then... they encounter the risen Christ. At first, without knowing it's him.

Friends, hear the good news: the good news is—while Jesus didn't redeem Israel, he does redeem lives and circumstances. That **IS** what he came to do. He may not fulfill all of our prayers and plans, specifically, as we want them fulfilled, but he does fulfill the deepest of human needs: He heals human hearts and hurts.

He restores relationships and renews lives. He faithfully shows us love and gives our lives purpose and meaning. And, he meets us on the road if we've left the game early. That's grace. Surprising grace.

And we're surprised by grace because *he* comes to *us*. He doesn't stand off or away somewhere and wait for *us* to come to *him*. He meets us along the road of our lives, just as he met these two on the road to Emmaus, especially in those places and times of disappointment, or when we've given up hope. He never gives up on us, even if we've given up on him.

I love it in the story that it's *Jesus* who comes up to *them* on the road; it's *Jesus* who initiates the conversation and asks *them* questions, and it's *Jesus* who opens the Scriptures and explains the story. He persisted with them.

In the Christian tradition we talk about following *Jesus*. In this case, *Jesus* follows *them*! And then stayed with them. And *Jesus* follows us. That's part of discipleship too—recognizing the risen Christ, who is with us. "Surely goodness and mercy *shall follow me* all the days of my life..." the psalm says. *Jesus* never gives up on any person, or situation. Even if we, or someone we know, has left the game early and has given up on their hopes and dreams, or has become cynical about the state of the world.

I love it that Jesus appears to these disappointed disciples somewhat in disguise—looking very human. He doesn't appear with a flash of light/brilliance and say "Look! It's me, Jesus! C'mon you dummies, don't you recognize me??" No, he lets them see and hear and discover for themselves that it's him. He doesn't force himself on them, but graciously and sneakily draws them back in.

And I love it that he does this by asking questions, and drawing them out. Jesus was always a master at asking brilliant questions, but here it's kind of playful, and cheeky. As I've said, when we've reflected on other accounts where Jesus asks questions, it reminds me of one of my favorite television characters... Colombo. This bumbling and somewhat disheveled detective who looked and acted like he didn't have a clue, but always at the right time, usually at the last minute, he asks that zinger question ("One more thing..." "I was just wondering...").

Jesus asks them, "What are you talking about?" And they speak of all the "*things*" that just happened. And Jesus asks, "What things?" (snicker, snicker) He draws them out. It's brilliant. And by the time they get to the house, they are practically begging him to stay with them. Jesus has begun to win their hearts.

So Jesus always initiates relationship with us, *and, it is always true* that he never forces himself on us, or anyone. There comes a moment when he says in effect, “I can go on, or I can stay. What would you like?”

And that seems to be critical. It was critical that they said, “Stay with us.” They had to respond to the invitation that Jesus was dangling out there in front of them. Jesus will never force himself on us, yet he is always with us, initiating relationship.

Jesus never gives up on those who have been disappointed and have left the game early.

Here is another grace: after the resurrection the only people Jesus appeared to were his friends—especially the ones who were disappointed and had left the game early. The ones who gave up on faith. He didn’t appear to his enemies, and say “Haha! I won. Neener, neener...” He didn’t appear to Pontius Pilate, who sentenced him to death. He didn’t appear to the Pharisees, who made his life miserable for 3 years. He didn’t appear to the Roman soldiers who mocked him and tortured him. He appeared only to the ones who at some point trusted in him, yet had given up or were disappointed; or to those who failed in some way, like Peter—who was also in deep despair; not because of disappointment but because of personal failure. And we have this marvelous

account in John's gospel of the risen Jesus restoring Peter with forgiveness and grace after his failure. And giving his life new meaning and purpose as he gives him significant work to do.

And with all of these friends of his, he revealed himself to them in moments of community, friendship, and familiarity—for example in our reading today, the breaking of the bread. Something that was familiar to them. Without words, Jesus simply broke bread, and you can almost hear them saying, "Omg, it's Jesus!" Jesus didn't scold them for leaving the game early, but graciously revealed himself to them in love, and explained his plan: Here is why this had to happen, in this way. And then he invites them into the story and plan of redemption.

This story tells us that Jesus is with us, always. Sometimes he is in disguise—and Jesus may appear to you and me in a surprising way. So, be open to surprises! My spiritual mentor got her Ph.D. in "The surprises of God in Scripture and through the centuries." So, I hear this a lot: be open to surprises and the unexpected.

My prayer and hope is that *our* eyes may be opened, *our* hearts warmed, and our lives changed because of a life-long friendship with the risen Christ.

What road are you on this morning? What journey are you on right now?

If you are struggling with disappointment, or cynicism about life or the state of the world, listen: no matter what the score is in life, the game is never over, because Jesus lives. Hallelujah!

Come to the Table of Grace