

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Christ Incognito”  
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Easter 3—April 30, 2017

Lessons: Luke 24:13-35

If they said it once, your parents probably said it a thousand times: Don't talk to strangers. For children and for others who cannot take care of themselves, this is a good rule. *Don't talk to strangers*. But for adults, for those who are able to take care of themselves, the rule may not be so good after all. There may in fact be a great value in talking with strangers. Several years ago, the New York Times published a story about these rules. We all know them: on a subway or public bus, don't make eye contact, stay as far away from other people as the space allows, and for the love of God, don't talk to anyone. However, a pair of behavioral scientists “approached commuters in a Chicago area train station and asked them to break the rules. In return for a \$5 Starbucks gift card, these commuters agreed to participate in a simple experiment during their train ride. One group was asked to talk to the stranger who sat down next to them on the train that morning. Other people were told to follow standard commuter norms, keeping to themselves. By the end of the train ride, commuters who talked to a stranger reported having a more positive experience than those who had sat in solitude.”<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if in our attempts to protect ourselves, keeping away from strangers, adding all kinds of security around our persons and communities, maybe we might actually be protecting ourselves from God. For those who can take care of themselves, there may be a great value in talking to strangers.

Abraham spoke with strangers and extended hospitality to them and in so doing discovered that without knowing it he was entertaining angels. Many of us have had extraordinary encounters at one time or another with a stranger who gave us new understanding, or perspective, or a moment of joy, or a minute of compassion. We've been taught that strangers are dangerous, and yet strangers also offer opportunities for growth and inspiration.

We don't know very much about the two people who encountered a stranger in our gospel today. One was named Cleopas. The other we don't know. I've heard that this might have been a couple. It might not have been two men; it might have been a woman and a man. It doesn't really matter though. These two had become followers of Jesus. They weren't among the inner circle, but they had left their homes to follow and when Jesus died they too found their dreams shattered. The most difficult day for them was most likely on Sunday. Some of you know that when a loved one dies, it is hard enough to make it through the service, but then once that is over, when everyone else goes back to normal, that's often when the real pain begins. It was that way for Jesus' followers on Sunday. For observant Jews, Sunday was like our Monday, when everyone simply went back to work and the world seemed to say that the life and the death of Jesus simply did not matter. For Cleopas and his companion, they simply wanted to get out of town, to get away from the horror they had seen, to get away from this uncaring city and these uncaring people. So they went to Emmaus.

Fred Buechner suggests that everyone of us sometime has also gone to Emmaus.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth W. Dunn & Michael Norton, *Hello, Stranger* © The New York Times Company April 27, 2014

“Emmaus can be a trip to the movies just for the sake of seeing a movie or to a cocktail party just for the sake of the cocktails. Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that [people] have had--ideas about love and freedom and justice--have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet there, on the road to Emmaus, in the midst of their despair, they encountered a stranger. They didn’t recognize him, but he walked with them: Christ incognito. He interpreted the Scriptures for them and later when they looked back on the experience, they spoke of the way that their hearts had burned within them as he talked with them on the way. Much of our religious experience is like that. We recognize it in our memory; looking back we can recognize the hand of God, even if we couldn’t see it in the midst of the experience. This is why it is so important to take time to reflect on the day or the week, or the month gone by. Looking back, we can discover God’s presence.

As they came near to Emmaus, the stranger seemed to be going on, but since the day was almost over, they persuaded the stranger to stay with them. If you read the story in the King James Version it says: “Abide with us, for it is toward evening.” Those words were in the mind of Henry Francis Lyte when, after visiting a friend who was dying, he wrote the hymn “Abide with me, Fast falls the eventide.” Evening and darkness are coming, so abide with us stranger, whoever you are. Stay with us. Sitting around the table he took bread and broke it and gave it to them, and then their eyes were opened and they recognized him and he vanished from their sight.

He comes out of nowhere and he returns just as mysteriously. He comes to us when the world is not as it should be, and sets our hearts on fire, giving us meaning in a world that seems so meaningless and random. And around the table, in the breaking of bread, for an instant, we recognize him. And then he’s gone. Gone maybe because he needs to be with others helping them to understand that the gospel isn’t just about grief and disappointment; it is about life and joy. He vanishes because on this side of God’s new world all we get are fleeting glances. Maybe that’s all we need. Maybe we don’t need to see him more because that glance is enough to strengthen us for our calling. He vanishes because we can’t nail him down, even with nails on a cross.

Some people interpret this story as saying that we meet Jesus today in word and in Sacrament. He opened the Scriptures to Cleopas and his companion and in sharing bread they recognized him. So, these interpreters would say, we meet Jesus today in the word proclaimed and in the sacrament celebrated. We meet Jesus here in the community of faith where we encounter him in the Scriptures that we read and interpret week after week. We find him in our Bible stories and we find him around the communion table. I believe that is true, but that is not all that this story proclaims. He doesn’t just come to us here in the proper and established religious channels. He doesn’t just come to the inner circle of believers. He doesn’t just come to church. He also comes to disciples who are totally unremarkable and whose names are hardly mentioned. He also comes to us on our Emmaus

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<sup>2</sup> Fredrick Buechner, *The Road to Emmaus*, in *The Magnificent Defeat* © 1966 Harper Collins

roads. *We* don't always have to work to find Jesus; we don't always have to be the ones looking for him. For Jesus goes out to find us, especially when our world is shaken and our faith is weakest. Often times we won't recognize him, except in later reflection. He is Christ incognito and where we open ourselves to breaking bread with strangers, not just in church, but out in the world, amongst confused, hurting, broken people, there our eyes may be opened and there we may recognize him.

One of the benefits of having hip surgery is that I am required to go walking. Some of you are good walkers yourselves. The next time you go walking, keep your eyes open for familiar strangers. One of them might just be Jesus, Christ incognito, coming out to find you. Talking to strangers may not be such a bad thing after all.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, stay with us; be our companion along the way, kindle our hearts and awaken our hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in Scripture and the breaking of bread, that we might recognize you in the stranger's guise. Grant this for the sake of your love. Amen.