

## Blind Spots

a sermon by J. R. Luck at Peace United Church of Christ, May 8, 2011

Many, many moons ago, my oldest son asked me to help him find a toy. I don't remember exactly what it was, but I do remember it being red. So I said, "So, you're looking for your red toy?" "Yep, can you help me find it?" "Well just out of curiosity buddy, does it look anything like the red toy in your hand? He looked at me, looked at the toy and then giggled, "Yeah... that's the one." Mandy will tell you that he inherited that gene from me. After all she can tell you stories about me looking for my glasses while they are on my face. That's right. They weren't even on top of my head, but on my face. Now regardless as to who does or does not have Attention Deficit Disorder, haven't we all used the colloquialism, "If it had been a snake, it would have bitten me"? Some of the things that are the hardest to find, are the things right smack dab in front of our faces. And that was certainly the case with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And maybe, it's the case with us as well.

Now remember folks, these two guys may not have been one of the 12, but they are disciples of Jesus nonetheless. In other words, they aren't strangers, and yet they don't recognize Jesus. For that matter, Mary didn't recognize Jesus in the gospel of John. But I hope that doesn't surprise you too much. After all, we frequently, if not usually fail to recognize Jesus in our midst. How about you? How many times did you discern Christ's presence last week? What? Do you think he wasn't there?

I think at least a good chunk of our blindness can be contributed to the places and the ways we look for Christ. We look for Him in churches and cathedrals. We look for God in glorious services at Easter and on Christmas Eve. We listen for God's word from well-rehearsed choirs. We listen for God's word from a trained minister who, in most churches, is placed way up here on high. At the last church, I was so high up and so far away I had my own zip code. In other words, if God is going to speak to us, we expect something big, holy and other. Big booming voices. And angels. If we were to see Jesus or a saint we would expect Jesus to glow and the saint to have auras about them. I mean, didn't the angels on *Touched by an Angel* glow just as they revealed themselves?

And we expect light shows. Yesterday driving back to High Point from the mountains, I passed a church with huge letters out front that spelled "Jesus is Alive!" Each letter was at least were 6 feet high with flashing lights around each of the letters. I said not a word. Zak, my youngest, looked at me and said, "That's weird." Amen son, amen.

Like I said, we want light shows and we want the unusual, which I think is a bit unusual because with Jesus you usually get the usual. You see, when Jesus performed miracles, he was always asking people not to mention them. And when he preached he doesn't mention demons or angels; he doesn't preach on miracles or resurrections. There are no prophets, no references to major events like the Exodus, no time before time (John has that by the way, but that's John, not Jesus). So what does Jesus talk about? Well he talked about the inbreaking of God's kingdom, BUT when he does he referred to the utterly mundane and the ever so quotidian. He says the Kingdom of God is like... a woman who... a man who... the yeast which... the mustard seed which.... He talks about wonderfully ordinary people and what are the wonderfully ordinary doing? They are searching and growing and farming and kneading and worrying. They are getting married and investing their money and complaining before a judge and casting seed and eating bread and drinking wine. And that my friends is the paradox: the Kingdom of God is most like the most ordinary of things and experiences which we experience daily and weekly.

As for the two Emmaus disciples, they had the same problems we do. After all, when they saw him, he wasn't on top of the tomb; his presence wasn't announced by glowing angels, there was no earthquake, there were no bands and there were no 6 foot neon signs that said, "Jesus is Alive!" They were just two ordinary, disillusioned, sad folk who still had enough wits about themselves to offer hospitality to an alien. And that leads me to the second reason that we may miss the presence of Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke uses the word *paroikos* in this passage which can be translated as "stranger," or "exile" or, my personal favorite, "alien." There is something deep in our collective psyche that fears aliens

whether they are aliens in Well's War of the Worlds or illegal aliens on the US/Mexican border, or maybe those aliens who are of another religion. Here in North Carolina on Friday two imams, Muslim religious leaders, were pulled off an Atlantic Southeast Airlines plane after "passengers felt uncomfortable" with them being on the plane. The two men were dressed in full traditional Muslim dress but they had been screened just like every other passenger had, with absolutely no reason for concern. And yet, the pilot would not take off with them on board. Two days later, we're at church and the lectionary tells us that these disciples first experience Jesus as an alien. I wonder, how often we really think about Jesus appearing as one who doesn't belong?

I want to go back to that greek word for alien, paroikos. That is the same word where we get the word "parish," the word that is sometimes used for a local church. And if that is the case, then as a parish we are a gathering of aliens; a gathering of people who don't belong. And whenever there is a gathering of two or three aliens, there in their midst will be Christ. And so maybe, just maybe, the reason some churches have trouble growing and have trouble discerning the presence of Christ is because they only attract people who belong. Maybe growth is dependent on the presence of an alien or two. At the very least, it is dependent on the presence of the alien Jesus of Nazareth.

And so this is the math of the gospel: take 2 or 3 completely ordinary individuals and add something as simple as adding hospitality to an alien - the willingness to listen, a simple act of kindness, a broken loaf of wonder bread, and voila! There he is, our Risen Lord!

I know. I know. Some authors have made a lot of money talking about Jesus coming back on the clouds with eyes blazing and smiting a lot of people in the process. Their biblical evidence for such thoughts is minimal... very, very minimal. But there's another way to look at this that is a lot more biblical. Perhaps it's time we stopped looking for God to come back in some miraculous and magical way where we go "oooooh" and "aaaaahhhh." Perhaps it's time we stopped looking for God's handiwork only in events which defy the laws of nature. In fact, I think it's time we stopped looking for God only at Easter and Christmas and only amidst the holy, whatever that means and whoever they are. Rather, I think it's time we looked for God on I-40 and at the office and at the mall and at Harpers and in the cafeteria line at school and in the doctor's office and in line at the bank and absolutely anywhere there are aliens. You want to see God this week? Look amongst those who speak a different language, hang out with the single mother using her food stamp card, chat with the person bagging your groceries, buy lunch at Panera for the person who will never, ever ever join a country club. Look there and I bet you that there's a better than even chance you'll discover the presence of the Risen Lord.

Lastly, let me talk to you just for a moment about Emmaus. In the Bible, only Luke tells us about this town. Now the Jewish historian Josephus mentions a Roman Emperor stationing troops at an Emmaus, but that site is too close to Jerusalem to be the same town. So where is Emmaus? Well, to this day 4 different towns claim to be THE Emmaus. Many a scholar will tell you it doesn't even exist. So what are we to make of that? Try this on for size: maybe, just maybe Emmaus is nowhere because Emmaus is everywhere. Emmaus probably comes from a word meaning "hot spring." In other words, Emmaus is a place where we find refreshment; a place where we go to relieve our congestion; a place where we go to recharge our batteries and to have our eyes opened. Is this place Emmaus? Well answer me this: is Peace a spa of refreshment; is it a place where ordinary people and aliens of all sorts can experience the simple gifts of hospitality? If the answer is yes, then my answer is yes, this is Emmaus.

In this week before us, keep your eyes open for our Lord, but for heaven's sake don't look to the heavens. Jesus came here and here we will still find him amidst aliens, amidst real people, amidst broken loaves of bread, amidst simple acts of hospitality. It's not that hard folks. God's as close as the glasses on my face that I can't find and maybe that is exactly part of our problem. Amen.