

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then 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?” ¹⁹ He 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, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But 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. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and 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. ²⁴ Some 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.” ²⁵ Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷ Then 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. ²⁹ But 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. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. ³² They 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?” ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were

saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵ Then 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.

Thanks be to God.

You may not know this, but everyone in my family tree suffers from poor eyesight. Siblings, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents – we’ve all worn glasses or contacts or had cataracts or all of the above. I got glasses in the second grade. Big, plastic, Coke bottle glasses. If we had a projector screen set up, I’d prove it to you with photos that would make you gasp and giggle.

In sixth grade, I started wearing contacts. Special, non-disposable contacts to address my astigmatism. My eyes went from bad to worse and then really, really awful. When I was a senior in high school, the optometrist said that if my eyes continued to change as rapidly as they were, I might have to have a cornea transplant.

Thankfully, in my early twenties, my eyes stabilized and my prescription didn’t change that much for several years, but it was not possible to function without contacts or glasses. I could not recognize people right next to me without them. I was 20/440.

But technology is awesome, and in 2011, I was able to get Lasix surgery and after about a 20-minute procedure, my vision was corrected to 20/20, and I’ve had perfect vision since. Fifteen years of clarity. I even had the “vision” to move here and take this job! Pretty awesome, huh?

Many of us have had vision problems. How many of you wear glasses or contacts? How many of you have had cataracts or glaucoma? All those issues used to be untreatable, but not anymore! We’ve come a really long way with medical intervention for our sight in just a few decades.

But there are other kinds of blindness. One in particular affects young people. I call it Inattention Blindness. This significant loss of vision is due to a lack of social skills, fear of others, and the magnetic pull of our attention by our smart phones.

In our text for today, there is a line in the scripture that says the two people walking toward Emmaus did not know Jesus came alongside them. It says, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

And I’ve always wondered about that. Did they have poor eyesight like me, without the benefit of glasses? Or did the resurrected body of Jesus look noticeably different than the body Jesus had been in before? Did he transform from a brown-haired, brown-eyed Palestinian man into the blonde-haired, blue-eyed European man like I saw in all the images as a child? Or did God, for some strange reason, intentionally blur their vision so they couldn’t recognize Jesus?

Then, I started working in hospice chaplaincy, and this passage began to mean something to me in ways I had not understood before. I saw, firsthand, how grief affects our vision. Not just vision, but everything, really. One expert in bereavement said, “when you are grieving, you are automatically functioning with a limited capacity. At best, your brain is working at about 60% of your normal ability. At worst, you’re just barely surviving. You’re doing great if you’re staying hydrated, sleeping a little, and showering occasionally.”

And it dawned on me. These two travelers on the road to Emmaus are grieving. We have an advantage. We are reading this two thousand years after the fact. They are walking three days after Jesus died. Their grief is blinding them.

Now, this is not the most important part of the story, but there are two historical figures, Hegesippus and Eusebius, who write that the two people on the road to Emmaus are Cleopas and his wife Mary. And Cleopas, they say, is the younger brother of Joseph, which makes him Jesus’ uncle. Mary, his wife, may very well have been one of the Marys at the foot of the cross. These two were not two of the twelve disciples, but I believe them, whoever they were, to be persons who loved Jesus and who were in his inner circle. People who the “disciples” trusted. We know this because they were some of the very first to hear

the testimony of the women who said the tomb was empty, and at the end of the story, they return to Jerusalem and the “disciples” who were fearful and hiding, knew them well enough to let them in in the middle of the night.

So, imagine that you are a family member of Jesus. You’ve watched him grow up. You’ve heard Mary and Joseph talk about his wisdom and character. You’ve seen his ministry transform lives. He has performed miracles. He’s changing the world, and, though he’s not what anyone expected the Messiah to be, you believe he is the Messiah!

And then, overnight, he’s arrested, tortured, tried, and killed. And you’re in disbelief. Shock. Confusion. Denial. Fear. Cleopas says to their walking companion, “we had *hoped* that he was the one to redeem Israel,” but he was crucified three days ago. Now nothing that they believed makes sense. Someone they loved and believed in was gone in a horribly cruel way.

I wondered if I was projecting too much of my own experience on this text, so besides talking about it a little on Wednesday at Bible Study, I also called on two church members who are well versed in matters of grief. Marilyn Brandyberry and Nancy Fortin co-lead a grief support group here at the church. They’ve experienced different kinds of grief in their own lives and been trained to support others in theirs.

I asked them if it seemed possible that the two travelers were so blinded by their grief that they couldn’t recognize Jesus, and they agreed. They said that any grief can disorient you and sap you of your normal ability to process information, but that the particular grief that comes from a traumatic, unexpected, or violent death is entirely different.

Marilyn said, “I think [that kind of] grief initially robs you of the ability to see any good in the world. You are in darkness and though you know if you look up out beyond yourself you will see light, you refuse to look anywhere but within yourself – your pain, your hurt - and you sit in the brokenness of your world until you start lamenting.”

Nancy agreed, and she spoke to the different kinds of grief in her own experiences. She said, “When my mom died peacefully in her bed, I grieved, but hers was a gentle death that I knew was coming. When my son died, I was in a fog. Nothing made sense. I couldn’t think or do anything. I couldn’t see the things right in front of me.”

I think that the people who loved Jesus dearly, who were related to him, who had lived with him for three years, who had envisioned what the next twenty to thirty years with him might be like, were in no way prepared for the trauma that had occurred over that fateful weekend. Despite Jesus’ words of warning for weeks and months to come, those who loved him had not seen the crucifixion coming, and it shocked them in a way that blinded their vision.

Looking at the scriptures now, I don’t think that Jesus’s appearance had drastically changed, or that God had rubbed Vaseline on the eyes of those who couldn’t recognize him. Jesus was walking right alongside Cleopas and the other traveler. But they couldn’t see through their tears, and their brain couldn’t process it either. They were blinded by grief.

What I love about this story now is three-fold. First, Jesus teaches that suffering was not the collapse of God’s plan but the path through which God would redeem us all. He flips the script. Secondly, it was not the quoting of scripture that convinced the two travelers that Jesus was walking beside them. And it reminds me that no matter how much I read the Bible to you, and translate from the original language, and no matter how many times I make you laugh during a sermon, it is not my words that will convince you that Jesus is with us. If Jesus couldn’t get his aunt and uncle to look at him while he preached, who am I to think I can? This story reminds me that it is not the preacher who convinces people that Jesus is with them. What finally works is the third thing that I love. Even though they were grieving, they carried on a conversation with a stranger, and the conversation got the travelers out of their own grief just enough to do what the Disney movie *Frozen 2* calls “The Next Right Thing” – they asked the stranger to join them for dinner.

When they urge Jesus to stay with them, when they offer him shelter and bread, when they make space for him in their life, even life that has been blindsided by grief —

that, that is when their eyes are opened. Dr. Justo González, one of my favorite theologians, writes that “hospitality becomes the doorway to revelation.” In welcoming the stranger, even in their grief, they welcome the Christ.

And suddenly, the world is different. Suddenly, the road behind them is not a road of despair but a road of encounter. Suddenly, the cross is not the end but the beginning. Suddenly, they see.

And in hindsight, they ask, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?” It was him! We saw him! Well, we heard him while our eyes were blinded by our tears. And when he spoke the blessing over the bread, we saw who he was, right in front of us.

Then they run from the table, back seven miles to Jerusalem. They return to the place where those who love Jesus are gathered, and they hear that Jesus has appeared multiple times that day. Not just to the women at the tomb, but to Peter as well, and they share their story. Jesus is alive! It’s a miracle! He is the Messiah after all!

The Emmaus story is not about a failure to recognize Jesus. It’s about grace. It is about the divine walking alongside us even when our eyes are blurred with tears and our brains cannot comprehend where God is in the midst of the pain. It is about the Savior who breaks bread with us in our confusion and sorrow and limited understanding and even sometimes our anger or guilt.

Our grief can blind us, but the inability to see Jesus does not make him any less present. And if we can remember to be kind to strangers, even in the midst of grief, Jesus will make himself known to us, especially in the breaking of bread. Amen.