

Text: Luke 24: 13-35
Title: Finding Jesus
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They were walking away.
They were just two ordinary Joes walking away.
They weren't insiders,
they weren't seekers running to the grave,
they weren't believers waiting in an upper room,
they weren't the pious puckered up with prayers of power,
they were just two guys walking back home.

Let's make some space for imagination.

James and John were always trying to get close to Jesus, and there was no missing when bumbling blustery Peter was in the room, but these two guys, Cleopas and the un-named one, were harder to define. They sat in back in the classroom; they stood at the doorway. They didn't want to draw attention, so they watched from the edges. They hung around, but they kept their distance. Truth be told, sometimes they would rather slip outside to feel the wind in their hair than spend one more minute talking about religious matters.

But, Jesus seemed to know that. He would look at them with an easy smile, sometimes a little wink, always welcoming, always encouraging, always inviting.

And yet, everything was different now.

Against a dark Friday sky they saw the limp body of Jesus being pried off a cross. On Saturday they were afraid to say too much, afraid to say too little; they sat with that day-after-death-polite-funeral-home-stiffness. Wondering how it all had ended, they were almost embarrassed of the hopes they had pinned on Jesus that were now moot, null, void, dead. Dumbfounded, they didn't know what to make of it all....

The resurrection rumors surfaced on Sunday morning. But, they were the wild tales of the women that had everybody else running around. There was no way to confirm or understand or..... It all seemed like too much:

too much to take,
too much to process,
too much to believe,
too much to swallow.

So, as the sun turned toward the horizon, they headed for home.
They walked away.

And then Jesus appears.

He doesn't sneak up or pop up from behind the bushes, but while they are lost in conversation Jesus appears along side. You would think that they would have recognized him. You would think that

something in his cadence of speech,
something in his tone of voice,
something in his smile when they asked questions,
something in the way he carried himself,
something would have given them a clue.

But, in the slanted light of late Sunday afternoon they don't recognize him. Could be because they were always on the fringes and never got a good look in the first place. Could be because he was the last person they expected to see. Could be the thick gauze of spiritual blindness that could only be lifted by God.

Of course they were in good company:

Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener.
Peter sees Jesus walking on the shore and doesn't recognize him.
Thomas needs to stick his finger in the wounds.
Jesus appears among his closest friends and needs to assure them that he is not a ghost before he orders the catch of the day.

The resurrected body of Jesus looked different. Transformed, transfigured, transfixed,.... somehow Jesus was physical enough to walk and eat and bear the marks of his passion, but spiritual enough to materialize through closed doors and disappear before dessert. He was different enough to be missed and familiar enough to be recognized.

And, you know the story. These ordinary Joes don't recognize Jesus by his gait; they don't even recognize him as he walks them through scripture; they recognize him as he:

took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them...

Now..... I know that this passage is a favorite of preachers, easily referenced for the centrality of scripture and sacrament if you want to see Jesus. But, is there anything else going on here that is faithful to the text,

helpful for our journey,
and instructive of God?

Try this.

Anne LaMott describes Jesus as a kitten that doggedly scampers along behind us. In her words:

...everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left. And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so

hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me. I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "&^# it. I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in." So this was my beautiful moment of conversion."*

Dear friends, they were walking away. They were doing what we all do at some point: shrug our shoulders, resign ourselves to not knowing, and turn for home. They weren't looking for Jesus; Jesus came looking for them. Jesus scampers up beside them and no matter how hard they try to manufacture or manipulate clarity they don't recognize who he is until their eyes are open. The verbs used for their seeing all passive.

So, can we say, again and again, that the heart of the gospel is that God seeks after us? Even as we're walking the road to Emmaus, wherever that may be, God continues to pursue us. The good news is not that we found Jesus ~ as if he was missing. The good news is that Jesus found us. The good news is that God doggedly chases after us.

There is a deep longing in all of us to find God. We gather, again and again, hoping to encounter the God who is found in scripture and sacrament. We gather, again and again, hoping to encounter the God who is found among his people. Thanks be to God.....

But, for those who are walking away,

for those who are running away,

for those who have checked out,

for those who are on the fringes,

for those who are "foolish... and slow of heart to believe,"

be encouraged, trust the pursuing power of God expressed in Jesus.

I don't know where to put any boundaries on God's pursuit of us.

He pursues us even beyond the bounds of death.

Second observation....

Jesus appears as *paroikos* ~ the Greek word translated as stranger, foreigner, exile, or alien. The two walking toward Emmaus, are so stunned by Jesus inquiry about their conversation, that they stop dead in their tracks, drop their faces in sadness, and ask if he such an outsider to Jerusalem that he doesn't know what has happened.

Jesus appears as an alien. I don't mean that he appears as some apparition from outer-space, but I mean as an outsider. He doesn't appear in synagogue or sanctuary, but in his resurrection just like his incarnation, he appears

as one on the margins,
as one hardly recognized,
as one out of the loop.
He appears as an alien.

So, dear friends, can we also say that Jesus won't be nailed down to our expectations? He won't fit our formulas and meet our standards. There is something about him that always reaches beyond our religious frameworks and aligns or alights where we least expect. Just when we think we have him in our grasp, he slips out.

Just when our hearts burn, he vanishes.

Is that too much of a stretch?

Or, can we say that Jesus Christ ~ the visible resurrected expression of the invisible living God ~ is found in scripture and in sacrament, but Jesus is also found

in the poor,
in the outsider,
in the unorthodox,
in the places we least expect.

Has your heart ever burned with the mysterious sense of God's presence in a time when you least expected it? When Jesus was *parokois*?

The good news is that Jesus pursues us in unexpected ways.

May our eyes be open to see Jesus.

May our hearts be open to receive Jesus.

May we welcome Jesus in the foreigner, the alien, and the outsider.

May we be found by Jesus

even when we're walking away,
even when we least expect him.

Amen.