

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of open eyes and ears, Loving God of the closed-minded, Caring God of the hearing and unhearing, Compassionate God of the soft and hardhearted, we find ourselves in all of these camps at one point or another. Sometimes we are willing to soak up new ideas and concepts like a dry sponge and eagerly grow. Other times, we feel like we are full of what we want and pass on the opportunities to soak up newness. We like the familiar and the comfortable. Sometimes we hear something and know you are in the midst of it; other times, it takes a good knock on the head for us to see you. We want to repent of our hardheartedness and our presumption about how you are to act, Creator.

We often find ourselves in the disciples' position, presuming we've got it figured out; you work on our terms and we're easily disappointed when things don't go our way. We see how the Jews and disciples of scripture struggled in their stubbornness. They refused to accept a lowly king and the news of Christ's resurrection because it didn't fit what they wanted. But we are the same. We think we know how you work, Gracious God, only to have our eyes and ears opened anew when you are working with us in a new way. Help us in our stubbornness to accept you as you come, as you present yourself instead of what we want. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of surprise, of familiarity, of newness, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one people, in all times and places, saying...

SERMON

It's done, once and for all. He made his mark on the world, and then he sacrificed himself. What a splash this man made with his brilliance, his know-how, and how he taught everyone to see beyond the simplistic. When it seemed like everyone had given up on him, he gave up himself for the benefit of all. He gave himself up and died. There was no

possible way he could come back. And just when you thought it was all over, the world knew once again that he lives. This, of course, is the story of...Jesus? No, it's the story of Sherlock Holmes. Catherine and I have been watching the new BBC Sherlock Holmes TV series called, simply, "Sherlock." At the end of the second season, in order to prevent the deaths of everyone he cares about, he seemingly completes suicide. All his friends, especially his assistant Dr. John Watson, mourn deeply. Two years later, Sherlock is forced to come out of his self-imposed exile to reveal himself once again to the world and stop a terrorist plot. He reveals himself first to Watson, picking the most inopportune time: Watson's just about to propose to his girlfriend. For roughly five minutes, Sherlock pretends to be the waiter, dropping hints to take a good look at him, but Watson stays rather complacent with his mind elsewhere. Soon, Sherlock gets his way. When Watson pays attention and fully looks up, he gets the surprise of his life. His old friend is indeed alive, and chaos ensues. Well, we see in this example and in scripture a lot lately that we don't always see and hear what's in front of us very well. We often live in our assumptions, in what seems to be the rock-solid truth. Well, that doesn't always mean everything. For Watson and the disciples, it would seem like no one could come back from the dead. That's a rock-solid fact, but that fact...wasn't true. They had to be really jarred to get the truth in the midst of their facts. In the same way, we have to be jarred out of our complacency to really get what's in front of us. It's...well, pretty much always easier said than done.

This is one of the most beloved scripture passages after Jesus' resurrection. Luke is the only Gospel to contain this story, but it does not diminish its impact on us as people of faith. It speaks to us in a special way. It is so popular, it has entered common language; a Walk to Emmaus is an encounter with God, sometimes an unexpected one. We see two

disciples on this walk to Emmaus seemingly blinded to the reality of Jesus right before them. I think, though, it has much to do with what the disciples are saying and thinking than it does with any imposed inability or unwillingness to see Jesus before them. Their biggest roadblock is...themselves. Let's look once again at this special story as we take apart the account of Luke, understand what's going on with these seemingly foolish disciples, and see how we can fall into the same traps.

Luke gives us the story of two disciples taking a walk after the resurrection. They heard the account from the women at the tomb that Jesus was indeed risen, but they didn't believe it. I'm sure all the ladies in the congregation are saying the same thing in their heads: stubborn men. I'll confess, sometimes it's the case. So, there they are, walking down the road to the village of Emmaus, not too far from Jerusalem. We know nothing about their business or the village of Emmaus for that matter, but they encounter a stranger on the road and start talking as would any friendly folk. They're in a commotion with everything, but this stranger seems to know nothing about the hubbub around what has happened lately. "What things?" he asks. So they fill him in. Their answer is quite telling. "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty indeed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." The last part especially gets me; it shows their mindset. They go on to recount the tale the women gave them, but there's a strange skepticism. They say it almost matter-of-factly, and it's obvious they don't believe it. This stranger seems to believe it and goes on to interpret the scriptures about Jesus with such vigor and newness that they find themselves engrossed. Well, it's getting dark, so they invite him to rest with them in

Emmaus, and when they sit down to break bread together, they finally see with the eyes of recognition. Here is the risen Christ! Before there can be any kind of response, Jesus disappears and they are left looking dumbstruck at 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?” they said. Of course, they had to run back and confirm that the story that the women at the tomb recounted was, indeed, truthful.

I think, when we look at this scripture side-by-side with the Easter story from John, we see many similarities. As you may remember, the Easter story from John spoke of Mary coming to the tomb early in the morning on Easter and having an encounter with the Risen Jesus. She, though, thinks he is the gardener. These disciples meet a stranger who goes with them. These disciples and Mary Magdalene somehow are unable to recognize the risen Christ before them. Mary finally recognized the risen Christ when he spoke her name: “Mary!” It took a little more with these two disciples. They heard him interpret the scriptures, they walked with him for a long ways, they invited him to dine and rest with them, and he broke bread before it all came together. What we see here are two disciples locked into a presumption about the way God works. “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” These disciples already decided what it was that Jesus was going to do, how, and when he would do it. They probably thought, as did most people, that the Messiah was going to come in with heavenly armies, kick out the Romans, destroy the Roman Empire, and establish God’s reign on earth. Being killed and coming back from the dead didn’t work into that equation, so why bother with that strange story?

The same story, time and again in scripture. The disciples, those who seemingly knew him best, just don’t see the risen Jesus. I don’t think it’s just literal; it’s very much

metaphorical, and it's meant to tell us something. The podcast Sermon Brainwave especially points out one piece of the scripture: "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him." The question then becomes how. Is God blinding them to Jesus' presence? I don't think so. Is something that they're doing or thinking to prevent them from recognizing the risen Christ? I tend to lean much more toward the latter explanations. I've said it before, and it's worth reemphasizing here: scriptural characters are people that are exactly like us, and we need to see them as such. It's easy to condemn these disciples in that they are just not seeing Jesus in front of them, but we all do it, and we talked about it on Easter Sunday. I would challenge anyone, anywhere if they say that they are perfectly in-tune with God and where God turns up. No one knows how God is leading us in every moment; no one knows their momentary and life-long calling in absolute, beyond the occasional moment of clarity. That's not sinfulness. That's not falling short. That's being human. That's why we need to discern, to really look and listen with how God is working with us in all times. When we think we've got God and the message of God all figured out, we fall into the trap of Mary Magdalene and the disciples. "Where have you taken my Lord?" she asks the Lord Jesus, presuming that he was the gardener and had to have moved him. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," said the two disciples, presuming they knew exactly how the ministry of Christ was to be carried out. Both were wrong, and once they saw that, everything changed. Indeed, it was only but a moment of clarity for these disciples. Once they recognized Jesus, he disappeared, and we are often faced with the same proposition. Nevertheless, in that moment of clarity we learn a great deal.

Why do we come here, to this place, in this time? There are many answers. To be together as this community of Faith is one answer. To worship God is another answer. One

of the biggest answers to me is to prepare. To prepare to be in the world and to see where God meets with us. As a part of preparation, we must be fed. The two disciples only recognized Jesus after they heard the scriptures interpreted, invited in the stranger, and broke bread with him. We seek to do the same. We come to hear the scriptures interpreted and to learn what all these things mean. We seek to invite the stranger into fellowship. And, indeed, we break bread together when we partake in the Eucharist and move into fellowship time. This may not be the place where you feel closest to God, and there's nothing wrong with that. God comes up for each of us in different times and places. However, this should be one of the primary places where we prepare, where we equip ourselves for the ministry of living and serving in the world. It is also a place where we can see things a bit differently, to understand a little better how God shows up unexpectedly.

As you are going about your lives today, indeed everyday, be prepared to meet the Christ. In scripture, he's not like many of the depictions we see today about a Christ who is attractive and easily lovable. Christ can just as easily portray himself in ways that we may not find all that pleasing or friendly but just as valid. We can better see the Christ when we live the same ministry as the disciples in this story. Despite their inability to see him, they heard the scriptures interpreted, drinking it all in, invited the stranger in and cared for him, and broke bread together. These are fuel for the journey, and just like in this instance, we are more able to see the Christ when we have the open hearts and committed spirits. It's not easy, but we don't commit ourselves to God's service because it is easy or because it's what we want; we commit ourselves to God's service because it is what is right: for us, for our neighbor, for our compassionate savior. Thanks be to God for these and many other gifts! Amen and Amen.