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Reckons¹

Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV) 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.

Comic writer Dave Barry once claimed that males are genetically deprived. They

¹I am very grateful to Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for her reading of this sermon and her most helpful suggestions and oh-so-apt phrasings at key points.

seem to lack, he says, the gene that allows them to ask for directions when they are lost. It seems plausible to me. It explains such seemingly hereditary traits as my father being lost for two hours in suburban south Chicago during a long-ago family vacation, claiming that, *"Nah, we don't need to ask; I'm sure we're almost to the right road;"* or me, in turn, wandering the back roads of southern Indiana, passing perfectly good gas station after gas station, passing dozens of people in their front yards who probably knew where they were, and instead saying, *"Nah, we don't need to ask; the map says it's gotta be here...."* Now, of course, many males might rise in defense and say you only need to ask for directions if you're lost, not just, uh, temporarily misplaced.

Yet, by whatever label you choose, people -- males included -- do sometimes get themselves lost, they do become unsure about how to get where they want to go, they do lose their bearings and go off in unsure directions. The story of the risen Christ walking with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is indeed a story of those who were lost, who didn't know how to get to where they wanted to go, who had indeed lost their bearings. And the story uses three phrases to describe them. First, it says that they were "sad." Undoubtedly. They had seen their friend and leader tortured and executed by the Roman government, and, on top of that, the women in their group reported that even the body was gone from the tomb. A sad and bitter affair, it must have seemed to them, dashing so much that had started so promisingly. Look at the painting on the cover of our bulletin today. Even in black and white, doesn't it capture those disciples' sadness, those small figures trudging through the gloom?

Second, the story says that they had "lost hope." Their dreams of what could have been seem to have been defeated by a cross and sealed in a tomb. And, third,

the story says that as they walked with Jesus they were "kept from recognizing him." Now, Jesus wasn't disguising himself or order to play a trick on them. That just isn't what we know Jesus to be. Nor did God somehow hinder their vision, as you'll sometimes hear folks say, in order for them to feel God's absence. That is never God's way. No, I think that the disciples were so devastated by their grief and despair and worries for the future that they could not see their very hope for the future right beside them. They could not recognize Christ because they had no imagination left, no more capacity to hope or to dream.

It has always intrigued me that this is the very *first* post-resurrection appearance story of the risen Christ in Luke's gospel.² Why? Well, it has intrigued me precisely because the setting for this story seems so utterly **ordinary**. I mean, think about it: if you or I had been consulted about the script for this drama, I think we would have made Jesus' very first post-resurrection appearance something much more. Wouldn't it have made a splash if the resurrected Jesus had first appeared walking across the top of Herod's swimming pool, as the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" has it?³ Or what if His first appearance had been to Governor Pilate -- the one who had washed his hands of Jesus' fate and sent him to his death. But no, the first post-resurrection appearance that Luke tells us about occurs on a dusty road, on the way to a two-bit town, to two disciples who aren't even named! Not to Pilate or Herod or Caesar, not flanked by a fleet of angels, but quietly to two of the disciples who had probably made themselves

²See also Edmund Steimle, "The Stranger," in God the Stranger (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), Chapter two.

³From "Herod's Song, in "Jesus Christ Superstar"
www.lyricsmania.com/lyrics/andrew_lloyd_webber_lyrics_679/king_herods_song__jesus_christ_superstar_lyrics_27030.html

scarce while Jesus was dying his awful and ignominious death. Indeed, it may well be that **we** today continue to miss those occurrences of Jesus' showing up beside **us** because we are looking in all the wrong places!

This, in fact, is precisely the key to this little story. A few years ago, there was a documentary made⁴ in which there is a scene where a group of American children are shown various pictures of various famous men and the children are asked if they recognize the picture. The first was a picture of George Washington. Only one of the children recognized the picture (despite the fact that all of them had dollar bills in their pockets!). Then they were shown a picture of Ronald McDonald. **All** the children recognized him. Finally they were shown a Sallman's famous painting of Jesus which hangs in so many homes and churches all around the world – including in our church parlor -- and which has been reproduced more than 500 million times!⁵ And how many of the children recognized who this was supposed to be a picture of? **Not a single one of them.** Now, whatever the merits or lack of historical accuracy of this particular painting of Jesus, this story does point out that we do find ourselves living in a world where Ronald McDonald is better known than Jesus, where American families make it to Ronald McDonald's place more than they make it to Jesus' place!

And that realization caused me to wonder: Why? Well, what if my friends, what if those around me, what if those whom I run into every day depended on **my** life to get a clear picture of Jesus, would they be able to recognize Jesus? If their entire

⁴"Super-Size Me." I am grateful to Ben Bohren for pointing out this illustration and for the way he asks (which I have built upon using some of his phrasings and examples) what it may say about how recognizable Jesus is in us in his devotional article entitled "The Week After," circulated via email on March 31, 2005 and archived here: www.sierrawebworks.com/ccncn/devo.htm

⁵www.anderson.edu/sallman/headofchrist.html

understanding of who Jesus Christ is were based on the way *I* live, would they be able to recognize Jesus? Or would they not see be able to see him either? Because here's the thing: if the Risen Christ does not affect the way I treat a clerk in the store, or the guy competing for my space in traffic, if Christ doesn't impact the way I spend my money, if the Risen Christ doesn't radically affect how I use my time, if the Risen Christ does not change my attitudes towards those whom Jesus called my neighbor, then how in the world would those around me be able to recognize Christ in me? If we claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior but *live no differently than anyone else*, then how can our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, our family members possibly see in us the Living Christ?

Those two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Jesus, but it certainly wasn't because Jesus wasn't trying. He walked with them. He taught them. He showed them how the love of God is stronger than even death. He comforted them. And he even fed them. And in all of that, my friends, is our own agenda, our own directive if we want people to indeed be able to recognize the Risen Christ in **us**: for there are too many people out there who are walking alone thinking that life is hopeless; there are too many people out there who have never known the Bible to be a source of light and life about a loving God and who too often have found themselves beaten over the head with it by those who would label them; there are too many people out there whose lives are hard and hurting and know very little comfort; and there are too many people out there who cannot say with any assurance when or how they will next be fed.

Will they recognize the Risen Christ in you and me? Will we help feed them body, mind, and soul? Will we help show them that God is a God of love, a friend and companion and not a tyrant and a bully? I think that is what those disciples were enabled and re-energized to do after their encounter with the Risen Jesus. In fact, the greatest miracle in this story, it seems to me, is finally this: that those two disciples turned around and went back to Jerusalem. For having recognized God in their midst, they turned around, their lives were changed. They didn't simply say, "*Hmm, how interesting,*" and walk on their ways unaffected. They didn't say "*Well, that was nice.*" No, they allowed it to get to them; it changed them. And so they went speeding off to Jerusalem forever transformed. Folks would have no trouble recognizing Christ in them now. For they sped off to teach, to feed, and to be with those who needed them, Jesus indeed recognizable in their faces, in their actions, in their words. They were the first evangelists to whom we can trace every church, new and old. I can almost see them as they turned around, running toward Jerusalem to shout the good news of the gospel.

When Barbara's and my daughter Katie was four or five years old, she was driving with me to a church where, as a Regional Minister, I was to preach that morning. But I got lost. Not seriously terribly lost. Certainly not lost enough to turn in my guy credentials by asking for directions, but lost enough that I had to look at a map and the directions again. And when I stopped to do so, I said to Katie, "*Well, I'm lost.*" And she said, rather puzzlingly, "*Just keep driving and I'll see if I can get*

some reckons.” I said, *“Katie, I don’t understand; what do you mean?”* And with that sigh of impatience that children do so well when faced with the slow-wittedness of their parents, she said, *“Just keep driving and I’ll look for a reckon – you know, something I reckon-ize.”*

When folks see your life and my life, what will they “reckon-ize”? Will our lives show the Risen Christ? Will folks be able to recognize Him in us? Will our words show them that God loves and cares for everyone? My prayer today and this week will be that I will indeed show the Risen Christ, that He will indeed be recognizable in me in new ways. And, my friends, I invite you to make that your prayer too: that through you folks would know, folks would recognize, the face of Jesus. May it be so – to glory of God! Amen.