Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2020

Luke 24:13-35

I have long wondered why the people on the road to Emmaus didn’t recognize Jesus. Cleopas and his companion – who is probably his wife, since Cleopas appears to be going home – don’t recognize Jesus when he appears beside them on that 7-mile walk.

I can think of several possible answers. Maybe they were in too much pain and sorrow. Maybe Jesus somehow looked different. Maybe they had bad eyesight. Maybe they were followers of Jesus who just never managed to get all that close to him, so they didn’t know exactly what he looked like. Or maybe they’d only seen him from one angle and now they were seeing another side of him.

But if I had to pick one, it’s that I think that they just weren’t ready yet. They were still making their way through the valley of the shadow of death, and their grief was too much of a burden to allow them to see past it, or to see who was accompanying them through the valley.

Lament takes time. Grief has to be processed. Only when we acknowledge that and put in the work can we find new life on the other end.

Luke tells us that Cleopas and his companion were discussing the past few days as they walked, trying to make sense of Jesus’ death and what it might mean. They were trying to process their grief, and that process was interrupted by the news of the empty tomb.

Along comes a stranger, and they are so stunned that this stranger seems to have no idea about what’s happened in Jerusalem the last few days that they stop in their tracks. How could he not know?

So they fill him in, sharing their lament: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

Rather than identifying himself then and there, Jesus allows them to express their grief. He doesn’t scold them. He doesn’t get angry or impatient with them, but allows them the chance to express their despair, their crushed hopes, their confusion and uncertainty.

At some point, they start walking again. And after they express their lament, Jesus starts explaining the Scriptures to them, helping them to see that he was the fulfillment of the prophecies.

When they finally arrive in Emmaus, Jesus acts as if he’s going to keep on going. But Cleopas and his companion insist upon offering him hospitality. “It’s getting late. Stay with us.”

And that’s an important moment in the story. Having heard the Scriptures interpreted, having gained some knowledge about God, Cleopas and his companion had a choice to make. Would they accept it and incorporate it into their faith, or would they continue to dwell in the valley of the shadow of death?

By offering hospitality, they were not only honoring centuries of tradition in their faith, they were signaling that they weren’t rejecting what the stranger told them.

Now it was time. They were ready.

As they sat together at the table, Jesus blessed the bread and broke it and handed it to them. In that they received grace and divine revelation, and their eyes were opened. They recognized who was with them.

Only to have him disappear.

And now they had another choice to make. Without any seeming concern for the fact that it was late in the day, they hurried back to Jerusalem so they could tell the others how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Cleopas and his companion were on a journey of uncertainty. And when Jesus appeared by their side, he could have interrupted their lament. He could have revealed himself to them sooner. He could have been frustrated or angry with them, He knew the Psalms, and he knew that the need to lament was part of being human. That pain has to be recognized.

But Cleopas and his companion needed to know that God was accompanying them as they journeyed through the valley of the shadow of their sorrow and uncertainty, so that they could see that their journey led them to new life.

As we make our way through the valley of the shadow, whether our lament is the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of possibility, the loss of being present in a community, or any other loss we lament, we need to be mindful of God’s promise to accompany us through that valley.

And we need to remember that the response of Cleopas and his companion wasn’t to question whether they’d imagined everything. It wasn’t to go to bed and leave for Jerusalem the next morning or a couple days later, when it was more convenient.

That same hour, they returned to Jerusalem and sought out the 11, so they could share what happened. Even though it meant they’d probably be walking as it started to get dark, even though it meant another 2-3 hours on the road.

They had hope again. The news was just too good to keep to themselves.

God invites us to always be looking for signs of God’s presence among us, whether we are on a journey of lament, or having a normal ordinary day, or experiencing an abundance of joy and happiness. And God invites us to *be* signs of hope, bearers of the good news, and to accompany others as they journey through the valley of the shadow. Because that’s how we take part in the redeeming work God is up to in the world.

May it be so for us.