

Luke 24:13-35: **Their Eyes Were Opened**

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Today we get to hear one of the most beautiful and provocative stories from Luke's gospel. Listen with me for God's word to us from Luke chapter 24 (NRSV).

Now on that same day two of [Jesus' followers] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.

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?" 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, 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. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 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?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Josh
 Tommy
 Jim
 Juliana
 Deana
 Connor
 Chea'von
 Darrin
 Jadon
 Jamal
 an unnamed man
 Deaji
 David
 Keionté

One city. One week. Fourteen lives. Fourteen irreplaceable lives cut down by gunfire.

This is bad news that you already know. The week after Easter was brutal for Louisville.

Maybe that gives us some empathy for Cleopas and his friend walking toward Emmaus. It's just the third day since Jesus their teacher was brutalized and executed as a criminal. A stranger approaches them and asks what they're talking about. "They stood still, looking sad." What a universally human moment. The bad news of death had pervaded their lives, like it pervades ours.

When news first broke about the mass shooting at Old National Bank, I was in the air headed for a week of continuing education. My phone started exploding with messages:

What's happening in Louisville?
Are you okay?
Is anybody at your church affected?
We're praying for all of you.

I was grateful for the kindness of family and friends, but it took a while to gather any details about what had happened. When I did absorb the news, I felt the familiar sadness, the all-too-common anger. *How could we let this happen yet again?* All that week I felt my heart pulled back here, to this city I've grown to love.

But I also needed to be where I was. I belong to a lectionary study group of thirteen Presbyterian pastors from all over the country. We meet once a year for a week of learning and mutual support. Along with shots of honesty and laughter and crying and bourbon. This time we gathered at Princeton Seminary, and the scholar joining us for the week was Eric Barreto, who teaches New Testament there. Eric is currently writing a commentary on the Gospel of Luke, so he invited us into those gospel stories that have been the most illuminating in his own recent study.

Eric got my attention right away when he said that Luke is writing this gospel for people who already know and love the story. For people familiar with the story of Jesus, Luke retells it to help them hear fresh new meanings, and to connect the story with their lives.

Well, that's exactly what all of us preachers are supposed to do. It made me feel more appreciation for what the gospel writer was trying to accomplish.

In today's verses, when Jesus shows up alongside the disciples on the road, and asks them what they're discussing, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." It's a bizarrely passive sentence, as Eric pointed out to us. Who or what prevented Cleopas and his friend from recognizing Jesus?

It's true that resurrected Jesus seems to be a bit of a trickster. He shows up and disappears with no warnings. He says startling things. Maybe he's having a bit of holy fun with these guys. Let's see how long it takes before they notice...

Even if Jesus is being playful, I don't believe that God blinded the disciples to who Jesus was. Neither am I convinced that some evil force kept them in the dark. I'm not much of a conspiracy theorist.

I *do* wonder if they are kept from recognizing Jesus by the failure of their imagination. Maybe in their grief and trauma they find it impossible to imagine that Jesus is not dead. He has been murdered, and they know there is exactly zero chance that he'll show up to walk with them again. It is not within the realm of possibility. So they tell this curious stranger their story of dashed hopes. We had hoped...that he was the one to redeem Israel.

We had hoped...that Covid would no longer threaten people and disrupt our community. But once again it's why our choir and some staff and church members are not here today.

We had hoped...that our children's main concern at school would be learning.
 We had hoped...that our workplaces would feel safe.
 We had hoped...that our elected leaders would take action to restrict assault rifles.
 We had hoped...that Sandy Hook would be the last mass shooting,
 that Las Vegas would be the last,
 that Parkland, that Uvalde, that Nashville would be the last,
 that Old National Bank would be the last...
 We had hoped...

But can we even imagine an America where guns are not worshiped? After that awful week in Louisville, Megan said in her powerful sermon last Sunday, "It is because of our failure to take the steps necessary to curtail gun violence that we need to be reconciled to God over and over again."¹ Like the disciples on the road, our imaginations fail us all too often.

Cleopas and his companion walk and talk with this stranger for the whole afternoon, apparently getting quite the sermon — a sermon that remains a tantalizing mystery to us readers. It's late when they get to Emmaus. The stranger looks like he's continuing on but when they strongly invite him, he stays for supper. The three of them sit down and the stranger takes the bread. Blesses it. Breaks it. Gives it to them.

¹ Megan McCarty, 16 April 2023 sermon, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville KY.

Wait a minute...this feels familiar.... Back when Jesus fed 5000 people(!) he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. On the night he was arrested, he shared bread with his friends in exactly the same way. Now here in Emmaus the strange guest takes the role of a host and does the most Jesus-y thing imaginable. He hands bread to Cleopas and his friend, and in that moment their sense of familiarity explodes into amazement.

Their eyes are opened, revealing the present moment in all its impossible glory: Jesus himself, killed in front of hundreds of people, now sits at their table, very much alive, handing them bread to eat.

When you and I read this story, we have the benefit of knowing up front that the stranger is Jesus, alive again. But to these two disciples, it's all shockingly new. Jesus' resurrection flies in the face of everything they know about life and death. For that matter, we share the same challenge. Resurrection doesn't fit into the world as we know it. We probably need the whole fifty days of this Easter season just to begin imagining the disruption that is resurrection.

Because dead people don't come to dinner. They are gone for good. Aren't they? The disciples' view of reality simply couldn't include a resurrected Jesus. Until through the gift of faith, the gift of expanded imagination, their eyes were opened.

Through Jesus, we learn that God will not be constrained by death. And through Cleopas and his friend, we learn that God will not be constrained by our limited eyesight. Before Jesus ate with them, the disciples could not see past Jesus' death. They were in mourning. But in the breaking of the bread, their eyes were opened, and they saw Jesus alive in the present.

When the disciples' eyes were opened, it also illuminated the past. After recognizing the strange guest as Jesus, Cleopas and his companion start to rethink their whole afternoon. My favorite line of the story is when they say "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 turn to each other and share how passionate they felt while the stranger taught them, stretched their imagination and their faith. All he taught them — about the Messiah, about God's work in human history — all that comes into focus only *after* their eyes are opened. If Jesus is alive again, could he indeed *be* the Messiah God promised to Israel? And does this explain those rumors of an empty tomb? We had hoped!

Such questions and hopes are bursting in the disciples' hearts after Jesus reveals himself to them. And right away they share that experience with each other! The disciples encountered Jesus in community, during a long walk together, in generous hospitality offered to a stranger, over a shared meal.

That lavish welcome is at the core of Luke's gospel. Eric Barreto says,
 [Luke] does not contain...blueprints for hospitality so much as a vision of what belonging could be. The texts can reveal that our imaginations are too narrow and that, in the light of God's welcome, still much more is possible than we can even

imagine. The stories connote what it feels like to embrace and be embraced at a bountiful table.²

Luke repeatedly shows Jesus at table sharing a bounty of food and drink. At Emmaus Jesus shares the bounty of life revealed in his resurrected self. And the risen Jesus bountifully opens the imaginations of these disciples.

Their eyes were opened, and they saw Jesus alive in the present.

Their eyes were opened, and they saw the past in a new light.

And when their eyes were opened, they glimpsed God's future. The moment the two disciples recognize Jesus, he's gone without explanation. It's a mysterious disappearance, even exasperating. But notice the beauty: Jesus stays with them until they recognize him. And when they get it, when their minds are blown with recognition and hope, only then does Jesus depart for his next mission. Clearly Jesus is alive and has places to be. He can't be held captive in one time or place. He takes off into God's future, to reveal himself to others who also need their eyes opened. And he leaves behind an empty chair at the table, inviting the disciples to invite someone else into his circle of grace.

Cleopas and his friend jump up and rush back to Jerusalem, not caring that the road is now dark and dangerous. They are different people now, changed by their startling supper with Jesus. They can't wait to share their news, to tell others what their eyes have seen. And that, my friends, is the very beginning of Christ's church.

Christ resurrected shows that with God, nothing good is beyond imagination. Including the possibility of a society where guns do not rule. Quoting Megan again,

God has given us the brains and all the tools necessary to creatively think our way out of this. If lawmakers are not going to take the action that is demanded of them, other solutions will have to bubble up from the masses, because we are tired of feeling unsafe, we are tired of inaction, we are tired of people thinking that weapons are the answer when we know as people of God that this is not the world as God intended.³

May our eyes be opened to the past, to God's work in each of our lives.

May our eyes be opened to the present, to creative imagination that cultivates freedom from violence.

May our eyes be opened to God's future, to Jesus' abundant table where there is always space for one more guest.

In the name of the Host, and the Guest, and the Bread of Life.

² Barreto, Eric D. "A Gospel on the Move: Practice, Proclamation, and Place in Luke-Acts." *Interpretation* 72(2). p.180. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0020964317749544>

³ Megan McCarty, 16 April 2023 sermon, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville KY.