

A STRANGER WALK ©

Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly
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Bloor Street United Church
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER - April 11, 2010

Based on Luke 24:13-35 & Isaiah 55 – see end of sermon notes

Last Sunday – a perfect Easter morning, spring excitement and anticipation into the air, and here we were – welcoming congregation, fine music, and, best of all – The Good News: Christ is risen! Risen indeed! A glorious day!

But it didn't start off that way for Jesus' first friends. Most had come up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival – expectancy palpable. But the tragic events of that first Holy Week have left them bewildered, confused.

What most do next, we know not. But Luke tells us about two disciples, so we'll follow them today – one called Cleopas, the other unnamed. These aren't 'important' people whose names go down in history books, just ordinary folk like you and me, on the adventure of following Jesus – that always takes us to surprising places we could never guess ahead of time. They trudge the seven downhill miles home to Emmaus, heads down, backs turned to Friday's cross, thinking their Jesus-adventure over.

Oh, they remember how Jesus' magnetic spirit had drawn them from families and jobs, how he'd taught them as no one before, broken bread with them on hillsides, in grainfields, in their homes – how he'd opened them to God's awesome Spirit like a sunset opens the sky – beyond words. But, that was then.

Now – he'd not taken power as they'd hoped, but had been executed like a common criminal – leaving their dream deflated on the road like a punctured balloon.

So they, like Peter and John before them, just go home. And while they are talking with one another, Jesus himself comes near. But their eyes are kept from recognizing him.

Imagine! Jesus right beside them, and they don't sing, "He walks with me and he talks with me." They have no idea! There is no blinding light – no orchestral strings. In Luke's telling, the Risen Christ doesn't impose himself, doesn't land unexpected in their midst like an Easter ghost. Though they mourn because he's gone, he has never been so near!

The irony wasn't lost on those who, later, waited in cells behind the gate to the lion's den. Or on prisoners of conscience of all ages, when hope flickers like a dying candle, all good things seem lost, the whole world a place of tombs and strangers.

But – Good News! They discover that God is ever-close, though "eyes are kept from recognizing" – kept by some surrounding presence who knows our little lives, and loves them, and waits with us for the right time for our blinkered eyes to see – all the way through to the other side of tears. But it is not yet time.

Jesus draws close, and asks, "What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?" They stop – still – and look sad.

Jesus always asks this kind of question – what we're doing, thinking, feeling, praying. He is, after all, our primary spiritual director.

We're always 'discussing.' How many emails have you had this week? How many cell phones in our purses and pockets right now? Always discussing – in restaurants while others at that same table go on eating (as if this is normal); on streetcars, talking loudly as if no-one else exists; in cars, even while driving (hands may be free, but not heads); in homes; offices – texting from room to room – always 'discussing.'

"What? Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened?" Stranger – Luke uses the Greek word *paroikos*, which can also be translated *exile* or *alien* – one who is different, who doesn't belong.

Now, all the gospels tell of Jesus' hide and seek Resurrection appearances, so calling this traveler a 'stranger' is no accident. Christians will not find their Lord 'until' he wishes to be found. Martin Luther said, Jesus "reveals himself by hiding under contrary appearances" – until we are ready. A stranger, exile, alien, different one, who is really friend! God loves irony!

“We had hoped he was the one.” How sad! We had hoped that Jesus “would be the one” – who would heal the cancer, the broken marriage, calm our rebellious teen, stop the killing fields, bring the whole world home.

God hopes, too: that our hope will be infected – by Stephen Lewis’s passion for attacking the blight of AIDS and cancer on Africa – by the people of Grassy Narrows (who slept in our church this week, protesting, at Queens Park, the poisoning of Mother Earth’s waters in our own province. God hopes that our prayers will be impassioned by miners in West Virginia’s death traps, by Haiti’s hurt, Kyrgyzstan and Thailand’s dis-order, by Israeli-Palestinian chaos (and in the name of faith!)

God hopes for us, and has hoped from creation’s bright dawning – that it would work out differently. God is still hoping!

And in the mean-time (oh, how mean), the stranger invites the two walkers to tell him their story. And out it pours! Storytelling always helps the healing! They blurt out their own version – which is always limited – by our own little experience, perspective, our own frail humanity.

“The things about Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people; our leaders handed him over” – never a mention of Pilate, the occupying Roman Governor, the only one with authority to crucify. This is Pilate, soon to be removed for his reign of murder and humiliation of the Jews.

Why did Luke whitewash Pilate as he wrote this story down – why did Matthew and John do the same thing?

Story always gets twisted to accommodate – and this is an anti-Semitic day. Pilate becomes a well-meaning handwasher, Jews are blamed for it all, and have been for generations. In 1934, the Christie Pits riots, and signs on Kew Beach that read “No Dogs or Jews Allowed”, no name on the Beach Synagogue until 1970 (because serious vandalism always followed), 1939 – the St. Louis, with no port to take them in.

I say this, not to whitewash Israel, for being ‘victim’ never justifies victimizing, but to illuminate humanity’s way of skewing history. And a lot of it started with Pilate. Without him, Jesus would have been in trouble with some Jewish leaders, but not with Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus, not with all those he’d healed and helped and loved, people of all faiths, and none.

“Oh, how foolish you are, how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” the stranger says. Then beginning with Moses, he tells them again – from covenant with Abraham to Exodus from Egypt, from Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones to Isaiah’s suffering servant – God’s Easter Resurrection plan to restore all of creation, of humanity.

“Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer all these things?” the stranger asks. Necessary – not because God causes suffering or requires crosses to fulfill some divine plan. But necessary – because of the freedom we have to be in the world and live our lives, for good or not. Necessary – because those who follow the path of God’s love will inevitably collide with powerbrokers of the world. Necessary – for God-only-knows what reasons!

Easter is the declaration that the rulers of this world do have their word, but never the last word. There is a wider power, a greater wisdom, a broader hand that encompasses all of the world’s strutting and struggles. Truth crushed to earth will rise again. Easter comes to say God’s world is made that way.

Then – “As they near the village, the stranger walks as if he is going on, but they urge him strongly, ‘Stay with us.’”

He waits for an invitation. Jesus never barges in. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” Abide with me, fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens, Lord with me abide. If they hadn’t pressed – I wonder – would he have come in?

Getting to know Jesus requires willingness to open our hearts – to the unexpected, to surprises not scheduled in datebooks, to strangers we meet on the road. If Moses had not turned aside to see what that odd bush was doing, would he have heard God calling his name? If Abram and Sarai had not invited sojourners in for tea, would they have welcomed angels unaware? If Jesus had not faced down the worst that could happen, would he have seen full glory-light? We all have choice – Jesus, too.

Cleopas and the other disciple might never have known what they missed if they had not invited him in. “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” says a verse.

But they did invite the stranger into their lives. He sits down with them, takes bread, blesses, breaks, and feeds them. And it is in the breaking of bread, Holy Communion that is at the core of our faith, that he is known to them. He has been with them all the way, but they only know it as bread is broken.

And in their every-day! DaVinci isn't there with his pallet. No silver chalice or gleaming brass has been polished for the occasion. It's in their every day, as they wake from their own beds, sit in their familiar pew, hear the choir make beautiful music, pray and sermonize together (it's a complete sermon only when you catch it and take it into your every-day lives.)

In our every-day – Christ lives! God's love is stronger than the worst the world can do. Eyes are opened, and hearts begin to sing.

Then – in that very moment, he vanishes. He doesn't hold still for them any more than he did for Mary in the garden. "Do not hold me," he says to her, and to them, and to us.

Jesus never stays in the same place, or has the same stranger look every day. How dare we churches try to define him, contain him. Whoever we think he is, wherever, whenever, he's already moving on down the road – with other walkers, who, in God's time, also cry, 'Oh, didn't our hearts burn within us?'

So – how fast are we moving to catch up – to be where Jesus is – where he calls us to be? Or are we still sitting in a comfortable pew talking about 'the way it was', trying to choose a colour to paint the room where Jesus once appeared?

"That same hour," Luke says, the energy of his Presence carrying them forward, they immediately get up and rush back to Jerusalem – not even noticing the uphill climb! They don't sit around for the rest of evening chatting about how great it was; they don't wait for somebody else to do it, or set up a committee to study it. That same hour, they rush headlong into the world with the Good News.

And they find others who are excited, too. "The Lord has risen, and has appeared to Simon!" Then, Luke says, they tell what has happened to them on the road – how he was made known to them in the breaking of bread.

The Good News of these Easter days is that there is an indomitable Presence who cares about our story, and presses us on, out into God's world (now – this day) where strangers wait to walk with us and talk with us, where new life will be broken open in Mystery's holy Easter way.

Christ is alive. Thanks be to God! Amen

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 24: 13-35

On that same day, two disciples are going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, talking with one another about all these things that have happened.

While they are discussing together, Jesus himself comes near and walks with them; but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

He asks them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stand still, looking sad.

One of them, Cleopas, asks, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" "What things?" he asks.

"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. 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, they did not find his body, and they came back and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then the stranger says 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 interprets to them things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they come near the village, he walks ahead as if he is going on. But they urge him strongly, saying, "Stay with us; it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."

So he goes in to stay with them. When he is at table with them, he takes bread, blesses and breaks it and gives it to them. Then their eyes are opened, and they recognize him. And he vanishes from their sight.

They say 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 get up and return to Jerusalem; and they find the eleven and their companions gathered together. They are saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they tell what has happened on the road, and how he has been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

A RESPONSIVE READING OF ISAIAH 55

Seek the Lord while he may be found,

call upon him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake their way,

and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them return to the Lord,

who will have mercy on them,

and to our God,

who will abundantly pardon.

REFRAIN (Voices United 884) *sung by choir, then all*

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;

instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;

and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,

for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

THANKS BE TO GOD! AMEN