

“The Eclipse of the Christ”  
April 7, 2024

Deuteronomy 30:11-14  
Luke 24:13-35

Once again, America is looking up.

No, it's not that we are all feeling positive and optimistic.

We're gearing up for tomorrow's eclipse and looking up to the heavens.

When we look up—whether to see the moon and the stars at night or the strangely fading afternoon light on Monday—we look with wonder.

To look up is to be reminded of our finitude, our smallness. In the vastness of the universe, our own solar system is almost non-existent. The distance to even the nearest stars and the empty space between are so vast that they make us dizzy.

To look up is to be reminded of our limits. We are bound to this earth, bound to these few years, watching star light that started toward us long before this church was founded, long before the time of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets.

We can feel small and limited and painfully alone in it all.

But to look up is also to sense that we are part of something far greater than ourselves and our world. Owen Gingerich, the wonderful Mennonite astronomer who spoke here several years ago put it this way: “For me, part of the coherency of the universe is that it is purposeful—though probably it takes the eyes of faith to accept that idea.” We look in the hope that beyond the beginning—and beyond the ending—is One who is both beginning and end, first and last. In our finitude and our smallness, we hope and we wonder.

This year, as our nation once again prepares for an eclipse, it strikes me that the accounts of the resurrection are stories about seeing and not seeing, about what is covered and what is uncovered.

In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Jesus outside of the tomb but thinks he is simply a caretaker.

That same Gospel concludes with a story of seven disciples going fishing. After spending the night catching nothing, they look toward the shore. John says that “Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.”

And then there is that beautiful story of Easter evening from the Gospel of Luke—two people walk along the road with a stranger, talking about all that has happened in recent days. *We* know they are walking with the risen Christ—but *they* do not recognize him.

The risen Christ is eclipsed.

I want to explore that this morning.

But, first, consider with me yet another eclipse.

Preaching and artwork over the centuries have generally portrayed Cleopas and his unnamed companion as two men walking toward Emmaus.

Some who have paid close attention to scripture suggest that this unnamed companion was Mary, the wife of Cleopas. Of the many “Marys” in the Gospels, one who is called Mary “the wife of Clopas” in John’s Gospel—and Clopas is a variant spelling of Cleopas.

The Gospels tells us that the father of James was the disciple Alphaeus, an Aramaic form of the name Cleopas. Luke tells us that “Mary, the mother of James” was present at the crucifixion and at the empty tomb.

While these connections have been part of church tradition since the second century, Mary’s presence on the road to Emmaus has been eclipsed, obscured—beginning with Luke, who only gives us one name.

A mosaic in the Washington National Cathedral shows those two close followers of Jesus, Cleopas and Mary, somewhere on the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus. We don’t know where they are—and we really don’t know where Emmaus was. They talk—we might imagine Mary trying to convince Cleopas of the resurrection meaning of the empty tomb.

We walk along our own roads of sorrow and grief, of despair and fear.

Someone we love dies.

A project at work or school turns into a disastrous failure.

The illness that seemed under control is suddenly getting worse.

Dreams fade and plans don’t work out.

Two followers of Jesus traveled that road long before us.

They walk along with a stranger who himself doesn’t even seem to know what has been going on in recent days.

We witness the eclipse of the Christ. As Albert Schweitzer said, “He comes to us as one unknown.”

There is something in this story about the eclipsed resurrected One that helps explain why we are liberal Protestant Christians—not conservatives and not progressives, who both have an unwavering certainty of the rightness of their ideas.

To our surprise and, really, to our great joy, we have discovered that the risen Christ is neither easily seen nor readily believed. Christ eclipsed is a symbol of our own always-incomplete understanding. Because of this we are reluctant to limit Christ by the definitions of creedal

formulas. We refuse to speak the final word about who Christ is and who might be numbered among those who follow him.

This is good news for people in the challenging and changing times. It means that as we change, as the circumstances of our lives change, Christ will be made known to us in new ways and set us to new tasks.

Christ is not ours to possess. We are Christ's. And Christ claims us and calls us to love this confusing world and the confusing people in it. We are Christ's and Christ goes ahead of us into all the uncertainty of each new day. Christ is free in the world, where we are called to follow.

Christ is present in the poor and the afflicted, in every life that we would deem insignificant or unimportant. And—wonder of wonders—Christ is present even in you and me.

I think that in this congregation we try to do what Christ asks of us—the demanding work of feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, welcoming the stranger. As we try—and when we succeed—our attempts become affirmations of our basic human equality before God and one another, a demonstration of respect for other faith traditions alongside our own, a living out of our commitment to thoughtfulness in our faith and faithfulness in our thinking, and to the creation and sharing of beauty.

Like Cleopas and Mary, at times we catch glimpses of who Christ the stranger is for us today.

As dusk approaches they extend basic hospitality to the One unknown: “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.”

At the table Jesus takes break, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them.

When Jesus gives bread, their eyes are opened and they recognize him. The One who had been crucified, dead and buried is there with them.

Which brings us back to the eclipse.

One person said of an eclipse: “It shouldn't happen. After all, the diameter of the sun is four hundred times greater than the diameter of the moon. But the sun is also four hundred times the moon's distance from the earth. These ratios make a solar eclipse possible.<sup>1</sup>

We might say the same of what happens at the table. Bread is bread. Wine is wine. We shouldn't see the risen Christ in such lowly elements.

But when bread is blessed, broken and given our eyes are opened as well.

And we have long been warned to not look directly at the sun during an eclipse. NASA has an entire web page warning us: “Except during the brief total phase of a total solar eclipse, it is not safe to look directly at the Sun without specialized eye protection for solar viewing.” An indirect viewing method might be safer.

Christ is eclipsed. So instead of looking directly, we take bread and remember a life broken that we and our world might be made whole. We take a cup and remember a life poured out that we and our world might be filled.

Our eyes are opened. By the grace of God, we recognize the risen Christ among us—not as one whom we can grasp and cling to, but one who seems to vanish almost as quickly as we recognize him.

If Christ the stranger can be found—as scripture suggests—in a garden, on a beach, or at a table, there seems to be no limits to how or where we might encounter him.

Our eyes are opened.

It happens at *this* table, but not only here.

It happens whenever we extend hospitality: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick. It happens anytime we reach out in simple or difficult acts of friendship or compassion.

The risen Christ comes to us—even in our despair and disbelief

Listening as we speak, as we search for meaning in the rubble of our lives.

Receiving our doubt and our grief

Accepting our invitation to stay a little longer when the darkness seems to be closing in around us.

Once again, our eyes are opened. By the grace of God, we recognize the risen Christ. And we are called out of darkness into light, out of bitterness into love, and out of death into life.

Look to the heavens tomorrow and you will see more than shadows and diminishing light. You will be reminded that all people are created in the image of God. All of us carry the Creator's ability to love, to bring order out of chaos, to seek the good.

Look at the heavens and let them speak of the light that shines in the darkness, of the hope that conquers despair, of the love that is stronger than hate, stronger than death.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://time.com/4894416/solar-eclipse-2017-meaning/>.