

“Christ the Stranger”  
May 1, 2022

Luke 24:13-35

This is always a changing congregation. In part it's the nature of our community—a lot of people come here for a period of time and then move on. We are a community of change in a city that is always reinventing and remaking itself. And if we are open to the grace of God, we find in that grace that we are even a community of transformation.

We hear stories of resurrection in this context of change this year. Maybe we hear those stories that way every year, but it is certainly shaping my understanding of Easter in these days.

We do not come to understand resurrection quickly. It takes time to grasp what Easter is and what it means for our lives. Luke's story of Easter hints at this—it begins at early dawn and continues until after dark.

When the women discover the empty tomb and two messengers tell them, “Jesus is not here. He is risen,” we're just at the start of things. We heard that beginning a couple of weeks ago: Mary Magdalene and the women with her tell their experience to the other followers of Jesus. Peter goes to check out the tomb and is amazed. But the words of the women are regarded, Luke tells us, as “an idle tale.”

The empty tomb does not settle matters.

As the day goes on, there is little Easter joy to be found.

Two followers of Jesus, Cleopas and his unnamed companion, take to the road heading out of town. Their hopes were dashed with the crucifixion. And reports of the empty tomb in no way revived them. They give voice to their despair, saying: “We had hoped that he was the one...” to a stranger who seems to have no idea of what has been going on in recent days.

Those who knew him do not recognize the one with whom they walk.

The risen Christ is first of all a stranger. As Albert Schweitzer said, “He comes to us as one unknown.”

There is something in these strange stories about the unrecognized resurrected One that helps explain why we are liberal Protestant Christians.

The risen Christ will not be pinned down to our specifications. The risen Christ will not be weighed down with our expectations. The living Christ will not be held captive by the church or by our own always-incomplete understanding or even by scripture. 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 changing times. It means that as we change, as the circumstances of our lives change, we will discover new ways in which Christ is made know to us. We will discover new ways of following this stranger.

Yes, like the women at the empty tomb, we will sometimes look for Christ in the expected places—places where he always *seemed* to be in the past. There might be times when we despair over not finding him there, times when the absence of God, a sense of emptiness, is all that we will know.

We can't get a handle on the risen Christ.

Christ is not ours to possess. We are Christ's. And Christ claims us and calls us to love this world and the 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. In doing so, we need to hear the good news that something new has begun. 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 the creation and sharing of beauty.

In all of this there is a hope that looks forward and a present joy. The “Yes” of resurrection that comes to us today and invites us to new ways of going about all we are called to do.

And, like Cleopas and his unnamed companion, at times we do 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.

But that's not the end of it. They don't then have a nice meal and call it a day.

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.

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

We take bread and remember a life broken that we might be made whole. We take a cup and remember a life poured out that we might be full.

We hear again the good news: “*This* is for *you*—in your brokenness, in your emptiness. Suddenly we find that we are, each of us, being called by name and that we are no longer strangers.

It happens at *this* table, and *because* it happens at this table, it also happens whenever we extend hospitality. It happens anytime we reach out in simple or difficult acts of friendship or compassion. It happens anytime we find the grace and the strength to follow the new commandment that Jesus also gave when he gave this meal and love one another just as we have been loved by Christ.,

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.

We will always be a congregation in change, a people in process. Through all of this, in all of this, the risen Christ—a stranger made known to us in all manner of ways—is calling us to new tasks, new opportunities and transforming us into his followers through all our changes.