

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Mourning, Mystery, Mission: Jesus Who?”  
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Luke 24:13-35

Psalm 23

She looked so familiar. I was in Beaumont hospital about two weeks or so ago and was hurrying through the food court in the South Tower. As I did, there was a woman eating something at one of the small tables. She was not in a position where I could clearly make out who she was. But to myself I said, “Boy that sure looks like Judy.” At the same time though I knew it could not be her. Though her husband had been in Beaumont recently, he had been transferred out to a rehab facility elsewhere in the city. Continuing on my journey I wondered if I should have stopped but, not being sure of her identity I thought it would be a bit creepy for me to go up to a stranger and say, “Oh, you looked like someone I know.” It was only later that day, when I received an email about Judy’s husband, that he had indeed gone back to Beaumont, that I realized it had been her in the food court. Have you ever had that kind of experience when you see someone out of context and think, that can’t be so and so, only to realize later that it was? Well, if you did then you were not experiencing whatever those disciples experienced.

Over the years people have tried a variety of ways to explain how the disciples, who had been with Jesus for three years, could fail to recognize him. The usual one is the one I just described...seeing someone out of context and not realizing it is them. However, let’s be honest, if I had actually stopped and said hello to the woman in the food court I would have instantly realized that it was Judy, just as the disciples would have recognized Jesus. A second explanation is what I call the similar but different, or the Gandalf the Grey theory. For those of you who do not know Gandalf, he was a wizard in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings series. At one point in the book he sacrifices his life in order that his friends could live. He does so by being cast into a proverbial fiery hell. Later in the books he reappears transformed from Grey to White; a transformation that happens when he defeats evil and “rises from the dead.” Yes a Jesus metaphor to be sure. Anyway, at first his friends don’t recognize him because even though he is similar to his old self, he is different at the same time. Yet they soon recognize him, just as the disciples, in other resurrection accounts, recognize Jesus when they see the nail marks in his hands. This is a nice try but it still can’t explain this story.

There are other theories offered including the “Jesus blinded them until he was ready to disclose himself” theory. But somehow I believe all of these are, pardon the irony, looking at the story and not seeing what Luke was trying to tell us. In other words we look at the story and miss the point because we are attempting to deal with the physics of the event and not with the

narrative itself. And, my friends, let's be honest here, there are many things in the scriptures, including the resurrection, which physics cannot explain. So what then is Luke really trying to tell us? What I believe is going on here is that Luke wants us to understand that the disciples did not recognize Jesus because they never really knew him at all.

Yes, I know that Jesus and the disciples hung out and travelled together for three years. Yet in the end, if we listen carefully to the conversation on the road we will see that the disciples had no idea who this Jesus was. And we see this in one often overlooked sentence. One of them says, "...but we hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." In other words what they had been looking for, even after three years of Jesus' teaching was a new Moses. They were looking for the reenactment of the Exodus story. Regardless of Jesus' stories about love, forgiveness and a very different kind of Kingdom, it had not registered at all. This new-Moses narrative was in fact so powerful that even when the women had returned from the tomb with the news that Jesus was alive, it could not register with the other disciples because Jesus was still just one more dead messianic pretender. He had been the one who was supposed to stop the suffering of Israel, rather than suffer himself. In the end then, these two disciples hadn't a clue as to who Jesus was and why he had come. Little wonder that they were not able to see him.

If Jesus is going to open their eyes then it will take more than a physical appearing. It will take reeducation. In order to accomplish this, Jesus takes them through the entire Old Testament in order that they see more clearly who he is and why he had come. In verse 27, Luke tells us that Jesus began with Moses and all of the prophets and interpreted to the disciples the things about himself in all of scripture. This action has often been portrayed as Jesus going back and pointing to specific scriptures and saying, "See, there's Jesus," in sort of a Where's Jesus Game. What I believe is that Jesus is doing more than that here. He is in fact retelling the entire story of Israel in such a way that the disciples will begin to recognize that, as NT Wright puts it, rather than saving Israel from suffering, that the messiah was supposed to save Israel through suffering. Let me say that again. Jesus wanted to show them that the messiah was not supposed to save Israel from suffering by being a new Moses, but was supposed to save Israel through suffering like the suffering servant of Isaiah. The true test of Jesus' re-teaching comes when they all stop for the night.

When the disciples stop for the night they ask Jesus to stay with them. This invitation also extended to the sharing of their bread, which they allowed Jesus to bless and break. When Jesus does this, blesses and breaks, their eyes were opened and they knew him. They knew him in that moment because finally the broken bread made sense. It was an intentional reference to Jesus' willingness to suffer for Israel and for the world. Now they got it. Now they knew him. Now they were able to see fully why he had gone the cross, and had been raised. Jesus' remedial work had been successful. We also know that his teaching succeeded because of the kind of community those disciples created. When they returned they did not do so in a politically triumphal manner, but in a way that led to the creation of a non-violent, self-sacrificing community. They discovered who Jesus was to the extent that they followed his lead.

The problem with which we are faced is that most of us, like the disciples, have found ourselves drawn to and holding tightly to a particular image of Jesus. These images might be Jesus as a CEO, an insurance salesman or perhaps a great trainer of individuals. They might be the pietistic images of Jesus as the guy we are supposed to be going steady with or the Santa Jesus who is supposed to give us everything. While each of these images carry with them a kernel of truth, they all fall short of the complex nature of the one who was the suffering servant; of the one whose body was broken and shed blood; of the one who was willing to lay down his life for the world; of the one who would suffer for us. The challenge for each of us then is whether or not we are willing to see a Jesus different from the one to which we hold tightly; whether or not we are willing to have our eyes opened to the one discovered by those two disciples.

My challenge then for all of you is this, to ask yourselves, am I willing to see Jesus in a new way; a way that might call me to a life which reflects that of the servant who gave his life for all?