

Aftermath: Recognizing Jesus

Luke 24:13-35

*The risen Christ can be seen in Word and Sacrament
—and everywhere else!*

A sermon preached by
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The late Elvis Presley—still the King of rock and roll—used to frequent Lil Thompson’s Steakhouse in Tennessee. He was good friends with Lil, who used to give him free food before he was famous. One night when he was at the height of his fame, the steakhouse held an Elvis Presley impersonator contest. A large crowd arrived, and Elvis himself slipped in. Presley decided he was going to take part and sat quietly at the back until his turn to sing. He thought confidently, “I’m going to smash this.”

Lil was worried the place would go crazy when everyone realized it was actually Elvis. There was no need for concern. Elvis got up and sang one of his trademark hits, “Love Me Tender.” The applause was polite, and Elvis won third place in the contest!¹

Apparently, it’s not always easy to recognize someone famous in your midst. Jesus may not have been as famous as Elvis, but he should have been recognizable, at least to those who knew him. But apparently, recognizing him after the resurrection was an issue. Mary Magdalene didn’t recognize him at first at the tomb on Easter morning. The disciples didn’t recognize him by the Sea of Galilee. And then there were these guys on the road to Emmaus.

One of the men is never named, but the other man is called Cleopas. We don’t know much about Cleopas; he is never mentioned again, but the fact that Luke mentions his name is significant. In John’s Gospel, one of the women at the cross is called Mary, the wife of Clopas, so he and his wife may both have been disciples of Jesus. Historical tradition identifies Cleopas as the brother of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, so maybe he was “Uncle Cleopas” to Jesus.²

At any rate, after the events of Holy Week, Cleopas and his friend were getting out of town. Emmaus was not far away, but they needed to go somewhere. On their way, a stranger came alongside them and asked what they were talking about. Cleopas said, “Are you the only person in town who doesn’t know what happened?”

“What happened?” Jesus said.

Cleopas answered, “Jesus, a mighty prophet and teacher, was handed over by our chief priests and leaders to be crucified.” Then came the sad part: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” All that hope was gone now. But that morning some women had surprised all of them. They had been to the burial place of Jesus, and said they found the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, and saw a vision of angels. What were they to make of that?

At that point, Jesus begins the process of recognition. But it’s not immediate. He doesn’t just throw back his hood and say, “Surprise! It’s me!” In fact, he starts by rebuking these two men for their foolishness and slowness of heart. They couldn’t see what was very clear from the words of Moses and the prophets. It was necessary for the Messiah to suffer all these things. These events were not a failure. They were not some sort of hopeless catastrophe. In fact, what happened to Jesus *was* their hope, and through these things he *would* redeem Israel. So Jesus began to teach them again from the Scriptures.

Pete Grieg, in the Lectio 365 devotional last week, found it remarkable that when Jesus could have just revealed his identity, instead he took the time to take these men back through the Bible to understand how the crucifixion and the resurrection were all part of God’s plan.³ Even though he was God’s Son, even though he could have gone straight to the point and identified himself, Jesus took the long way. He loved the Scriptures, and he still considered them authoritative. He knew that these men would never truly know him unless they knew the Scriptures about him.

And that’s how he taught them. These were the Scriptures “about himself,” Luke says. Ultimately, all Scripture is about Jesus. The scholars call this a “Christological hermeneutic,” which simply means that we view all of Scripture through the lens of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We understand and appreciate the historical context and original message of all of Scripture, and there is meaning apart from Jesus. But ultimately everything points to him. All the stories, all the laws, all the prophesy of the Old Testament look forward to the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, who would show us God’s Kingdom and redeem creation.

There is power in Scripture to recognize Jesus. Don Shelby was the pastor for years at First UMC in Santa Monica, CA. One day, a young sailor came to see him in his office. The sailor was about as dejected and low as he could get. He told Dr. Shelby how he had been a defiant atheist and cynic for many years. He had rejected God. In one memorable gesture, he had thrown his Bible into a dumpster.

But he said, “Lately I have sensed something happening to me. It is as though something is gnawing on my heart. Do you think God might be trying to get through to me? Could God still care about me after all the anger and bitterness I have flung his way?”

Don Shelby said, “That’s exactly what I think.” The young sailor asked for another Bible, and Don gave him one. They prayed together, and the sailor left.

Six months later, Don received a letter from the sailor, who was then out to sea. He wrote, “I have read the Bible every day since we talked in your office. I have accepted Jesus into my heart. Jesus is real for me now, and God is very near.”⁴ We find the risen Jesus in Scripture.

The second place we recognize Jesus is in the Sacrament. Holy Communion is a meeting place for Jesus and his people. This, too, was part of the Emmaus encounter. As they were finishing their Bible tutorial with the stranger on the road, Cleopas and his friend arrived at Emmaus. They implored this wise stranger to stay and eat before he went on his

way. When he sat at table with them, he began to do some very familiar things. He took bread; he blessed it; he broke it; and he gave it to those around the table. All of a sudden, they were reminded of ...Jesus!

Immediately, their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus. No sooner had they opened their mouths in surprise than he disappeared from their sight. And they said, "Aw, man! It was Jesus! Weren't our hearts burning within us while he was opening up the Scriptures along the road? We should have known!" They got up from the table and practically ran all the way back into Jerusalem. They found the other disciples, who were all abuzz because Jesus had appeared to Simon Peter, an appearance that we don't have a record of. Then Cleopas and his friend reported what had happened on the road and how they saw Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

If we have eyes to see, we still see the risen Christ in the action of Communion. We still take bread, bless it, break it, and give it. Holy Communion is a time when the spirit of Jesus is very near and real. Sometimes our eyes don't see. We think Communion is long; Communion is boring; the bread and juice are not that good; we're glad we only have to do this once a month (or more, if the sermon is on the Emmaus text). But if our eyes are open, we can see that this is a holy moment, one that Jesus instituted on the night before he died and told his disciples to continue to practice. The risen Christ is here.

Our Wesley founders loved Communion. John usually took Communion 3 or 4 times a week. To describe what happened at Communion, John used the term "real presence." He was not willing to go as far as the Catholics and say that the bread and wine became the actual body and blood of Jesus. But he knew there was more to it than just a symbolic memorial. What he was trying to say with the term "real presence" is that Jesus is spiritually present in the elements of Communion in a stronger, more intense, more concentrated way than any other act of worship.

Some of the most beautiful hymns Charles Wesley wrote had to do with the Lord's Supper. One of them is in our Hymnal:

O the depth of love divine,
Th' unfathomable grace!
Who shall say how bread and wine
God into us conveys?
How the bread his flesh imparts,
How the wine transmits his blood,
Fills his faithful people's hearts
With all the life of God!⁵

We can recognize the risen Christ in the Word of God and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. But here's the really good news: we can recognize Christ in the events of our lives every day. Our eyes can be open to see Jesus in the usual, the ordinary, the mundane moments of our lives. Because he is risen, he is alive. Because he gave us his Spirit, he is always around.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed this in a poetic way in her poem "Aurora Leigh":

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.⁶

Blackberries are good, and sometimes we need to enjoy the simple pleasures—the blackberries—of life. But there is also a deeper reality in everyday living, a spiritual dimension, a presence of the risen Christ. If we can open up our eyes to see with the eyes of faith, then we will walk with God every day.

One of the saints of the spiritual life was a Carmelite monk in the 17th century named Nicholas Herman. He is better known as Brother Lawrence, and his contribution to the history of Christian spirituality is called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Brother Lawrence was a cook in the kitchen of the monastery in France where he lived. Even though he spent his days in manual labor and menial tasks, he developed a faith that “practiced the presence of God” whatever he was doing. He said, “The time of action is not different from that of prayer. I enjoy God with as great tranquility in the hurry of my kitchen, where frequently many people call upon me at the same time for different things, as if I was on my knees at the holy Sacrament.”⁷

What if we could practice the presence of God in our kitchen, in our office, in our classroom, in our family room? Wouldn’t that make a difference in the way we see reality? Wouldn’t that make a difference in the way we experience life? Again, Brother Lawrence says: “There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and more delightful than that of a continual walk with God; those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.”⁸

Have you experienced that presence? Do you recognize the risen Christ? Let me return to Dr. Don Shelby, who wrote in a book called *Meeting the Messiah*, “Once we have experienced Jesus’ presence, we can never be sure where he will appear or what he will do to reach us. It is always the third day, and no one can set limits on God’s power or his purpose. Never can we know for sure how he will come, what he may bring, when he will confront us into greater becoming, when he will resurrect us. Therefore, we always have hope. No depth of humiliation or contradiction is too deep for his saving persuasion or constancy of love.”⁹

Christ is alive. He is here. He is present. Do you recognize him? You can see him in the Word, in the Sacrament, and in everyday people and events. This is the blessing of our Easter faith. This is the blessing of being Easter people. This is the blessing of having a risen Lord.

¹ “The True Complete Story of Mark Hanks,” 706UnionAvenue.com (1/28/21). *PreachingToday.com*.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleopas>.

³ Pete Grieg, *Lectio365* app, April 11, 2023.

⁴ Source unknown. From my sermon, “A Meal Like No Other,” preached April 21, 1996.

⁵ *United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 627.

⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Aurora Leigh,” Bk. VII, l. 812-826. <https://crammedwithheaven.org/poets/>.

See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aurora_Leigh.

⁷ Nicholas Herman, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, ed. Douglas V. Steere (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1950), 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ Don Shelby, *Meeting the Messiah* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1980), 68f.