

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "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. But 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, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said 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 interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said 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 got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The Unknown Christ - April 26, 2020

Luke 24:13-35

I have a picture of Jesus hanging in my office. Now before I go on, let me assure you that I did not go back in time and snap a photo of Jesus on my iPhone. Aside from the fact that Jesus was a man born in Israel of Jewish parents, it is probably safe to say that his appearance resembled that of most Jewish men. He probably had a beard, was probably quite tan because of all the time he spent on the road, and was of average height. I suppose that if there was something unusual about his appearance, the gospel writers would have mentioned it, but they don't.

So the picture I have is a bit different. It is the artist's idea of Jesus laughing. Yes, laughing. Most religious art portrays Jesus as a blonde-haired, blue eyed man knocking at a door with no doorknob, or a pious looking man kneeling and praying, or a wistful, somewhat sorrowful man looking out into the distance. He is almost always serious, even grim and often has a halo around his head in order that we know he's the one.

But I have a picture of Jesus laughing. Why? Because the Jesus I read about in the Gospels was obviously a man who loved life and enjoyed being with people. I mean, he gave up his life for us, he must like us! What an awful thing if Jesus went through his whole life preaching, teaching, and healing to benefit a human race he despised! No, I think Jesus laughed long and easily, taking delight in what he saw and looking at all the people he met with love, compassion, and a burning desire for them to become all that God created them to be.

So I have a laughing Jesus, a laughing Jesus who, after all, is just one artist's own interpretation of him. The fact of the matter is that we really don't know what he looked like and so, apparently, his closest followers didn't know as well.

Recall that in a number of the stories recorded after the resurrection, Jesus' own disciples, Mary Magdalene, and others are said to have seen Jesus in person, but did not at first recognize him. In today's scripture two of Jesus' closest followers, a man named Cleopas and his unnamed friend, met Jesus as they were returning to their home of Emmaus from Jerusalem. Jesus walked a long time with them, explained the scriptures to them, and they still did not recognize him until they shared a meal together and Jesus broke bread with them. How could it be that so many people who lived and worked with Jesus for many years did not know him?

Perhaps they could not recognize him because despite having heard him promise his disciples that he would be killed and then rise on the third day, they really did not believe or understand what he was saying. All they knew was that their friend, teacher, and leader was dead and as we all know, dead is dead. None of us, once we leave the funeral home, expect to see our deceased friends and loved ones again in this life. If somehow they came to our house and rang the doorbell and we opened up for them,

would we believe with our eyes that standing before us was someone we had just buried? Or would we say, "Hello, may I help you?" Dead is dead.

And that's the issue, isn't it? I mean the most important belief in our Christian faith is that dead is decidedly not dead. Yes, our time on earth is limited. We are born and our physical bodies will stop working at some point. However, Christians do not define life as merely confined to this "earthly tent" in which we happen to dwell for a few years. No, we wear this "Earth Suit" for awhile, wear it out, and put on an entirely new set of clothing, permanent clothes which will never wear out.

We make a distinction in our faith between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ. Jesus of Nazareth was a particular human being who spent about thirty-three years in what we now call the nation of Israel. He was every bit as human as we are. His body worked the same way ours do. He walked and talked, ate and drank, got tired and slept and, when his body was pushed beyond its physical limits by the horrible punishment called crucifixion, he died.

But the Good News of our faith is that the perishable man named Jesus was raised by God into an imperishable being we know as Christ. Christ means Savior. Christ means Messiah. Christ means the one who binds together our very limited, very physical humanity with a totally unlimited, totally universal spirituality. Human Jesus, risen Christ. Same and yet different. That perhaps is why even the closest followers of Jesus could not initially recognize him as the risen Christ. It was something they had never experienced before.

Human Jesus had to die in order for the risen Christ to do his work of bringing each one of us back into relationship with God. Jesus, even at the height of his popularity, was known by a fairly small number of people. Outside of his followers, who really knew him? Regardless of his fame in Israel, nobody knew who he was outside of Israel. No social media. No TV. No massive public relations machine. Just one man and several dozen close followers.

Only when Christ was raised could he begin to reach not only his followers, but the entire world in new and wonderful ways. What happened to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus was one of the first examples of how the risen Christ came to them and comes to us, each of us. The most amazing thing of all is that Christ came to them and still comes to us in marvelous and unknown ways. The familiar Jesus of Nazareth has been transformed by God into the unknown Christ who is able to approach each one of us in the way that we are best able to understand.

Christ is in us. Christ is in all of us, every human being on this planet. Now the difference is that while Christ is in you and me and even people of different faiths and no faith at all, people may not recognize or they may even deny the Christ living in us. We live our lives in a constant state of choices. We have the ability, given to us by God, to make choices in terms of what we do and what we say in accordance with Jesus' teachings and examples or something less or even opposite of what Jesus would have us

do. We know what we should be saying and doing. What we actually say and do can and often is quite different.

And that is where the Unknown Christ comes in.

I say, "Unknown Christ" because Christ can come into our lives at any time and any place, not just once but many times. What is unknown is how Christ chooses to appear.

In our scripture, Christ appeared to two of his followers, walking home after a long and discouraging week in Jerusalem. Christ came and talked with them and they reported that throughout their conversation their hearts were "burning inside." Of course their hearts were burning within them! The unknown Christ who was walking alongside them was touching the Christ who was inside of them. The Christ inside was responding to the Christ outside.

Perhaps this talk of "inside" and "outside seems strange to you. There is a prayer attributed to Patrick of Ireland, St. Patrick, which goes like this: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me."

What did he mean? Because Christ is in you and Christ is also in me and Christ is in every single one of us, it is reality that the Christ in you can speak to the Christ in me and that when the Christ in me hears and sees the Christ in you, my heart will burn, too!

Think about the most important, significant moments in your walk with God. There is no doubt that we have had spiritual encounters with the Lord individually on our own. But at least for me, my most significant, meaningful, life-changing encounters with God have been while being with someone else.

I didn't fully understand it at the time, but I know now that Christ was in my grandmother when, as a teen, I would ride the bus to downtown Pittsburgh and meet her at Stouffer's restaurant at Horne's Department Store. Those were very special times for me as I felt she could relate to me better than anyone else could at the time.

I remember as an adult encountering Christ in the person of a boy named Daniel, whom I taught when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Botswana. He was a wonderful child. Not the greatest student but one of those people who had the ability to make you feel loved and appreciated just for being who you are. Daniel died tragically of leukemia at age 12, something which could have been treated in this country, but not in the third world.

Since then there have been many moments, many special, wonderful, unforgettable moments where my heart burned within me as I encountered Christ coming to me in friends, family, and total strangers.

There was no flashing sign. There were no angelic choirs. A feeling, that's all. Just a feeling that I was in the presence of someone much greater and much more loving than myself. The presence of Christ. And there are many, many more times when Christ was there and I was unaware or have forgotten.

I'd like to take a moment right now, just a minute of your time, for you to think about how you might have unknowingly encountered Christ in your own life.

... Amen.

Perhaps during our moment of silence, you were not able to recall such an encounter. Sometimes it can be hard. Not every encounter with Christ is the stuff of unforgettable, life-transforming annunciations. Mostly our encounters are small, brief, and perhaps seemingly insignificant.

But they aren't. Every time the unknown Christ enters our lives, sometimes in a big way, but especially the small ways, they all have a way of adding up. More importantly, they all have a way of bringing out the Christ dwelling in our own hearts.

It is very easy, incredibly easy, to allow the busyness of daily living to blind us to fully understanding and recognizing the presence of Christ in us as well as all around us. We tend to take people for granted. We dismiss the words and gestures of others as meaningless. We don't take the time or say we don't have the time to simply open ourselves to God's love and God's peace and God's strength and let our weary, exhausted, worried, cynical minds just take in all in.

Because that's what it's about, friends. When Christ walked with those men to Emmaus, explaining the scriptures to them, He was taking the time, the loving time, the needed, valuable time, to show them just how much they were loved by God. "God so loved the world," John wrote, "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son." God's son, Jesus Christ, sent to accept us, guide us, and love us right now, without any preconditions.

Right now, the unknown Christ is waiting for you. At some time, sooner than you know, Christ will come into your life. Your heart will burn inside. You will experience the presence of Christ in your life. You will feel the love of Christ in your heart. You will know that this day and every day the God that made you, very much loves you and desires nothing more than the simple truth that you personally know how much God loves you. Welcome, welcome, welcome the unknown Christ into your life.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.