

Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

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Year A

Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him...

This story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is my favorite of all the post-Resurrection stories. For one thing, these two disheartened lovers of Jesus are not major players in the inner circle that appears in most of the Gospel stories: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Matthew, Mary Magdalene... These two are bit part players we only hear about once in all the New Testament: Cleopas and his traveling companion, who doesn't even get a name. We have no history on them and they never show up again. These two are second-stringers who remind us that the circle of grieving followers was much bigger than the little band of twelve men and a handful of women.

Maybe that is why I often feel closer to Cleopas and his companion, and closer to their experience on the evening of that first Easter Day. They also seem to be more open than their better-known colleagues who have shut themselves tight behind closed doors in Jerusalem. Cleopas and his buddy are somehow more ready to let down the barriers we humans erect to try to keep ourselves safe. We don't know why they didn't stay put, locked up with the others. We don't know why they are on their way to Emmaus, but we do know they are *on their way*, moving out to stretch their legs and, as it happens, their hearts and minds as well. And when they let *down* those barriers, they were let *into* an entirely new kind of experience – holy, healing, strange, and very sacred.

They had been walking and talking, and walking and talking, telling and re-telling the story to one another over and over again. They couldn't seem to stop even though their hearts and minds were so tired and battered they knew they were circling pointlessly around and around the heartbreak of it all. They were in such pain, pain of the most personal and private nature, pain we would usually think no one else could possibly understand. That's what makes these two disciples all the more remarkable to me. Because instead of excluding the unknown traveler when he falls in with them, instead of telling him to please, please mind his own business, they welcome him into their pain and confusion *and* risk exposing their own allegiance and love for Jesus.

They could, so much more easily, have treated him as Other, as someone to distrust, as someone who surely did not, could not understand them. But they have the courage to open up to the stranger, to confide their lost hopes to someone they have never met before. They tell him the whole terrible story of Jesus' execution and they expose their vulnerability even more: they tell the stranger that they had believed, really believed, Jesus was the Messiah. And what is their reward?

To me, this is the most amazing part of the whole story. The stranger begins to talk to them about their own holy scriptures, their most hallowed original texts and their historic interpretations that were sacrosanct, inviolable. In fact, the stranger's talk is close to heresy. *Starting with Moses*, Luke tells us, the stranger developed a *midrash*, an interpretation of the Torah and the prophets, that actually took huge liberties with the original texts. He re-told the message of the prophets and argued with them that surely the Messiah had to suffer before his glory could be revealed.

Those two faithful old believers could so easily have dismissed the stranger's very different understanding of their faith and repudiated his insights. It would have been much more "natural" for them to have been outraged by the changes of mind and heart he was suggesting to them. Instead, "they allow him to change their minds about their own faith."¹ They opened their minds to his ideas and let them find their home there.² And this is their reward: new and enduring comfort, blessed ease from their torment. It feels so much better to them, they long for his presence to keep healing them. They beg him to make the rest of his journey with them. *Stay, stay with us!*

So he does stay, just for a little while more. Just enough time for him to *be at table with them, to take bread, bless and break it and give it to them*. Just enough time for them to realize why they have been healed and grown and blessed by this stranger. Just enough time for them to *know*: we have been walking with the Messiah and we didn't recognize him! We have been healed and transformed by none other than our God, in our very presence. *Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.*

And then, as fast as they can get up from that table they are running to Jerusalem to tell the others, *their hearts burning* with Resurrection joy and healing, with Easter life, life that is forever. From their meeting with the stranger they have an experience so full of Christpower it will come to shape everything they do and say forever after.

Because now they knew. They *knew*. And let's remember: Their certainty, their healing comfort, their experience of God, their joy was not in the *church*. There was no church. Their knowing was not founded in the authority of any *creed*. There was no creed. And they didn't keep telling their story of death and resurrection empowered by any infallible or inspired *book*. There was no New Testament. Their joy and their knowing came from reaching out to a stranger, from the study of scripture with him, and from the breaking of bread together. And from that very first Easter Dinner on, we – just as they – catch our fleeting glimpses of the risen Christ in the breaking of bread, in the study of scripture, *and* when we reach out to the stranger.

In all the stories we have recorded, the disciples kept wanting him to stay, stay with them, stay put, stay the same. But Jesus never does. Jesus, our brother and our God, always seems to stay just enough time for us to catch a glimpse of the Christ, just enough time for us to recognize why it is we want him to stay so much; and then he calls us not to stay, but to follow.

Follow me, he says, follow me out into world if you want to catch another glimpse. Search every face because, you know, I could be a gardener, I could be an enemy, I could be any stranger on your road. The one thing you can be sure of is that I won't "look the part,"³ so you may not recognize me at first. Of course, you can always beg me to stay, stay put, stay the same, look the same, stay with you. Just remember, please, if that is what you choose, you will be left with only memories for company.

But if you choose to follow me, he says, follow me to search for my face in every stranger, in every garden, whenever you break bread, whenever you study scripture, you will recognize me over and over again. It may be as you feed hunger or wash feet or comfort sorrow. It may be when you let down your barriers and unlock the doors you think you need to keep you safe from the world. It may be in the insights of a stranger that can transform your understanding of your own faith. That's the way it happened on the road to Emmaus. You never know where you will recognize me next, he says, so keep your eyes and your heart and your mind wide open...

Because, what if the stranger is always God?

¹ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps To A Compassionate Life*, 173.

² Ibid.

³ Margaret Guenther, *Walking Home*, 130.