**The Real Presence**

**Text: Luke 24:30-31**

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My dad didn’t have long to live; that much was clear. It was Eastertime in 2012. Dad’s health had been declining for a year. We’d moved him into hospice care, where he’d been unresponsive for several days. I was speaking to him as if he could hear every word. But Dad was just lying there, his eyes open in a blank stare.

All of a sudden, there was something different about dad’s eyes. He was aware. He recognized me. For a moment, I had my dad back. I stopped in mid-sentence and said, “Hi, Dad!” And then, the moment passed. It was as if he had vanished from my sight.

I thought of this time with Dad as I read Luke’s story about the two disciples who walked to Emmaus on Easter evening; especially that key moment when they sat down with the Risen Lord to have supper. Luke says, “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” (Luke 24:30-31).

This is a fascinating story; for all sorts of reasons. Let’s review the key points: First of all, the two disciples don’t recognize Jesus for quite some time. Secondly, when they do recognize him, it is when he offers food to them. Thirdly, he vanishes from their sight.

Let’s look at these in more detail.

At first, these don’t recognize the Risen Lord. That occurs in several of the Resurrection stories. Jesus appears to Mary, and she thinks that he’s the gardener (see John 20:11-18). Jesus appears on the beach while the disciples are fishing, and they don’t know who he is (see John 21:1-14). And here, Jesus is walking with these two disciples to Emmaus, and they think he’s some clueless stranger.

This has always mystified me. Why don’t they recognize Jesus? Especially Mary in the garden and Peter on the beach, for crying out loud! For three years they had journeyed with this man: listening to him, sharing meals with him, learning from him. They knew Jesus as well as they knew members of their own family. How could they *not* recognize him?

Maybe the Risen Lord isn’t who we think he is. Maybe, for both those first followers of Jesus and for us, the Risen Christ appears in places that we don’t expect, under guises that we don’t recognize. Maybe he’s here, right here with us this very moment, hiding in plain sight.

Like a friend of mine, who went to church one Sunday morning, dressed as a homeless person. And no one recognized her. It was her own church, she was well known to the people there, she’d served as a worship leader and in other volunteer capacities, but that Sunday, no one said a word to her.

She could’ve been Jesus. You see, the Risen Lord isn’t restricted to being a bearded man, about 30 years old, wearing a robe and sandals. The Risen Lord can appear anywhere, in any form, in which he chooses to appear: whether it’s 2,000 years ago, or today. The problem isn’t that Jesus isn’t around anymore. The problem is that we don’t recognize him. Like the folks in that church didn’t recognize my friend. Like the disciples on the Emmaus Road didn’t recognize the Lord. Like the folks in Matthew’s story of the Last Judgment didn’t recognize Jesus: in the hungry person whom they did not feed, and the naked person whom they did not clothe and the stranger whom they did not welcome (see Matthew 25:31ff).

The Risen Lord is with us all the time. But too often, we lack the discerning eyes with which to see him.

At first the disciples, walking to Emmaus, don’t recognize the Risen Lord. And then, they do recognize him: “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35). They recognize him when he is doing a very Jesus-like thing: when he is offering food, when he is offering hospitality, when he is feeding someone. Jesus sees a couple of guys who’ve been traveling all day and they’re hungry; and he gives them food.

They recognize Jesus when he does a very Christ-like thing. Which is when Mary recognizes Jesus in the garden: he gently calls her by name, as he had so often done before. And it’s when the disciples recognize Jesus on the beach: he offers them wise guidance, and then he offers them breakfast.

The disciples recognize the Risen Lord when he does a very Christ-like thing. And so can we. Jesus is present among us. He is hiding in plain sight. And we can recognize him when food is offered, when hospitality is offered, when someone is hurting or troubled or confused…and the person is received with gentleness, and empathy, and someone calls him or her by name.

Joe Jackson was an old, broken-down, disgraced ball player. Kicked out of the major leagues at the prime of his career for allegedly throwing the 1919 World Series. He had the third highest career batting average in major league history. One of the two with a higher batting average was Ty Cobb. He was disgraced in a different way: despised by his fellow players for being such a dirty ball player and a nasty, mean-spirited human being.

Jackson was kicked-out of the game in 1920, Cobb retired in 1928. Fast forward to 1950. Joe Jackson is running a liquor store in South Carolina. Ty Cobb is passing through town and he’s thirsty, so he goes into the store to get a drink. These two veterans had played many a game against each other. But as Jackson waits on Cobb, there’s no recognition. They both make attempts to talk about baseball, but still no sign that either knows who the other one is. Cobb has paid for his bottle, he’s about to leave the store when he says, “Joe, Joe, don’t you recognize me!?”

And Jackson says, “Sure I do Ty; I recognize you. I just didn’t think you wanted to recognize me.”

It’s a little different, to be sure. Silently these two disgraced ball players did recognize each other. But, neither wanted to admit it. Until, in a moment of vulnerability, they call each other by name; they affirm each other in their shared sense of shame.

We too can recognize, in each other, our mutual vulnerability and confusion and pain. It’s not like I’ve got my act together and you’re a mess. No, we’re *both* wounded and vulnerable and broken. We both need to hear someone gently call us by name.

The fact of the matter is that we’re *all* wounded and broken; just like Jesus. And when we affirm each other in all of our brokenness, maybe we recognize something of the Christ in each other; maybe we recognize something of the Crucified and Risen One in each other. Just as the disciples recognized him that evening in Emmaus: when, with those grotesquely wounded hands, he offered them bread.

And then, he vanished from their sight! Which maybe tells us more about the disciples than it tells us about the Risen Christ. Notice it doesn’t say, “He vanished,” but, “He vanished *from their sight*.” Maybe the stranger was still there. But they no longer recognized him as Jesus. Perhaps it was just for that split second that they recognized him. Sort of like how I recognized my dad for that split second. The second passed, and Dad was still physically there, but I no longer recognized in his eyes that spark of his presence, that twinkle of his awareness. For all we know, that stranger may’ve still been sitting there in Emmaus; sitting there at table, sharing and eating bread; recognized only for an instant as the Risen One.

The stranger may still have been sitting at table, but the disciples were out of there, running all the way back to Jerusalem. Because sometimes it only takes a split second of awareness to realize that something wonderful has happened. And then you have to tell people about it.

When have you recognized the Risen Christ? In what down-to-earth, physical form have you seen him? Because, you see, when we talk about the bodily Resurrection of Jesus, we’re not talking about a simple resuscitation of his earthly body. A resuscitated body will die again. A resuscitated body looks the same as it did just before the heart stopped. But that’s not what the bodily Resurrection of Jesus is about. Jesus, having died once for all, is now alive forevermore. The Risen Christ takes on flesh and dwells among us: whenever the hungry are fed, and the stranger is welcomed, and the broken are treated with gentleness, and discerning eyes recognize him.

So look around. Look around with the eyes of your vulnerable heart. You just might see him. You just might recognize the Real Presence of the Risen Christ. Perhaps especially in the breaking of the bread. Amen.