

Luke 24:13-22

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,

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The perspective of Luke, very different, very important. The disciples talking together, Jesus himself came up and walked with them, but something kept their eyes from seeing who it was. What keeps our eyes from seeing or what keeps us from hearing, what keeps us from knowing? Luke is convinced that Jesus is with us, the risen Christ. Jesus is speaking to us, but something keeps us from knowing it. This sermon doesn't have a point, but it points to some things I've seen, with the invitation that it may point to some things you might have missed, as I did.

Sandy Sasso is a rabbi and an author, and she'll be with us on the 9th of November. She says one of the most important approaches to Scripture we can take is what's called midrash, which is to say that we find ourselves in the text, and the text interprets us. I'm going to try to do that today. I'm going to think about how Jesus comes to us, how Jesus walks with us, talks with us, but something keeps us from knowing who it is. Something keeps us from knowing.

"What a friend we have in Jesus." So the song goes. Did you ever meet a stranger who turned out to be your friend? I did. It began in the distant past. It was a little school in North Carolina. It was a graduate school, a place where they try to educate pastors. It's a place famous for basketball, a place that's embarrassed about soccer, and a place that really ought to give up football. Although they beat Navy yesterday. It is Duke University, and the Divinity School sits at the center of the campus on the right side of the chapel where in the chapel as you enter there is a statue of Robert E. Lee, which I find strange, and in the alcove beside the pulpit in the chapel lie the tombs of the founders and their bodies carved in marble, stretched out supine on the top of the caskets. The dead Dukes, all of them. In front of the chapel stands a 20-foot statue of James B. Duke, founder of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, and he's holding a cigar in his hand, looking Methodist and menacing, out toward the quadrangle where the students are.

In 1967 I was put in a room in a dorm with a divinity student from Mississippi. As first-year students, we were required to take a class called Systematic Theology, usually taught by the Dean of the school, Robert Cushman. Dean Cushman is a complex man with no sense of humor, who was completely incomprehensible, as were the five or six books which he wrote, which he made his students buy and read. Cushman had lost interest in teaching the class several years before, but then he noticed the grade point averages and the test scores of our first-year class, which was a class whose most distinguishing composite profile indicated mediocrity at best.

Dean Cushman, that year, 1967, forced one of the visiting professors to teach that class. The professor was 40 years old then. Now he's 80, and he's written an autobiography in which he refers to that class that he was required to teach in a most uncomplimentary fashion. He said the students were not accustomed to taking notes during lectures, which we weren't, and he was not prepared to deliver lectures to students who were chewing gum, which we did. He said that he knew he got our attention when he noticed that on occasion, we stopped chewing and our jaws dropped. Now, I know I've mentioned that before, in a sermon, and I may have told you that Professor Moltmann demanded that our papers, in the German style, be turned in on a certain day at a certain time, and if we turned our papers in late, he would dock us one point per hour. So we all put our papers under his door in such a way as to jam the door shut so he couldn't get in it, and had to get a ladder and break a window. I know that I told you all about that, and the window being broken, and I mentioned how we were told that the church was in such bad shape, and the reason you knew that is, if you compared the test scores and the caliber of students entering the Divinity School with the test scores and the caliber of students entering law school, you would see how much trouble the church was in.

Well, Richard Nixon graduated from Duke law school, so the caliber of students may have been higher in the law school with regard to test scores, but Duke law school is where the defrocked president learned ethics. I rest my case.

So I bought the book the professor wrote, and the day I read the chapter about our class, professor Moltmann and what he said about us, and the students. I called my roommate of 44 years ago and read that chapter to him. Larry lives in Virginia, he's retired now, he's had a long and successful ministry. We haven't seen each other for 40 years, though we've corresponded from time to time. Larry was so young-looking back then, so smart. He was a Merit Scholar. He was given a full ride scholarship to attend seminary. They paid him to go to that school, and he graduated with honors. He graduated *summa cum laude*. I graduated, in the words of Bill Cosby, "Thank you, Lawdy." We have talked from time to time, but it's been four decades since we had seen each other. He's a good friend, a respected church leader.

So I called him and told him about the class we took, and what the professor said about us, and he told me he was planning to be in Colorado for a wedding. I was supposed to fly to Nashville to attend a meeting for the Methodist Church on a particular day, and so we worked it out that we would get together on that Friday for breakfast, as I was headed

for the airport. He and Karen were at his son's house in Broomfield. I drove to the address I had been given, I knocked on the door of the house where he was supposed to have been. The door opened, a stranger came to the door. He was a large man, heavy with overeating, and he had a toupee. The man who answered the door was quite old, arthritic in fact. I knew I had come to the wrong address. I looked at this old man, he had a limp to his step, he was all wrinkled up. He looked like the old man in the movie *Up*, that's what he looked like. I knew I had the wrong house, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do, because that was the only address I had, though I did have his cell phone number, and he looked at me wondering why I had come to his house to interrupt him at 10:30 on a Friday morning. I figured the old man must have been taking a nap or something.

Then it hit me, about the same time it hit him, the stranger was Larry. It was a shock. I was invited in. I met his wife. She was also old. We sat down at the table and we just sat there and stared at each other. Who is this stranger? And we talked about the churches we had served, and how we had gotten ourselves in trouble. We talked about going fishing, years ago, in the Sarah B. Duke Garden pond, frog-gigging there, eating frog legs, and if they'd caught us we'd still be in jail. We talked about how it was difficult then to get dates, because nobody wanted to go out with a divinity student. And how we told the people we called to see if we could get dates, told them we were in graduate school. That worked for some of us, but not all of us.

We talked about how neither of us had been elected bishop, and that was a good thing for the church. And we pondered, who is this stranger? He isn't what he was, but neither am I. It was like a Stephen King movie. Who is this stranger? And where's the young man I knew? And where have all the years gone? Because of the way we were expecting each other to be, something was keeping us from knowing who we were. But as we began to talk, I began to see something I recognized in him. I saw the brilliant scholar who could take a full load of classes and with minimal effort get straight As. I saw the ethical student who had such moral principle that he refused to take an exam when he realized that someone had cheated on the exam by making copies of the exam before we took it. Larry got up and said, "This is too hard for me," and I knew that was wrong, so I got up and walked out as well.

I saw the courageous questioner who dared to ask questions no one else would ask of the professors, who tried to shock us into wisdom by embarrassing us in class. I saw the Christ-like friend who was always kind to our classmates, and who went to Africa his senior year because he thought the Third World Methodists had something to say to us. He was there, sitting across the table from me, the same bright, ethical, principled friend whose church honored him when he retired by creating a scholarship in his name at a college nearby.

Made me wonder, how many strangers are really friends that we haven't gotten to know? How many people we meet seem strange to us, but they're friends in disguise. What a friend we have in Jesus, Jesus who walks with us and talks with us, but something in us keeps us from knowing it. Well, I drove from my visit with Larry and got on the road to the airport for my trip to Nashville. I knew my seat assignment put me in the middle of

the row. I don't like to sit in the middle of the row, between people I don't know. I like a little solitude on an airplane flight. I don't like to socialize. I never tell anybody, when I'm on an airplane, what I do. I don't want to have to explain why bad things happen, or how it is that God can be the God of all people, but people see God in so many different ways, or how is it that Jesus walked on the water. You know, all those questions you might get on an airplane, as a pastor, sitting in the middle seat between two strangers.

The young man in the aisle seat was a student from the University of Colorado. He was pleasant enough, but he elbowed his way onto my armrest. And the young man who sat by the window where I would like to have sat was an African American who seemed to have a bubbly personality and a perpetual smile on his face. I had purchased a book by John Grisham, *The Associate*. I thought I might have three hours to sit there reading between two strangers and minding my own business. What, after all, would I have in common with a CU student, now that I'm a Ram? And what would I have to say, as a Westerner, to a black man with a heavy Southern accent?

I don't recall what happened, I don't even know that it happened with any intentionality, but William, the man in the window seat, said something about surprising his parents. I wondered where he'd been. I wondered why he was surprising his parents. Was he the prodigal son, about to return from a life, a period of time of debauchery and self-indulgent hubris? My preacher's mind was fashioning a sermon on the return of the sinner son, and I imagined how he might appear out of nowhere, knocking on the door of his home, and how his mother would fall down in a faint, and how his father would greet him reluctantly and with, perhaps, mixed emotions.

"Do you live in Nashville?" I asked. "No," he said. "I won't get home until midnight. I've got to drive to Knoxville. My wife's going to pick me up. My parents are going to be surprised. I'll get to see my son play PeeWee football Saturday. They don't know I'm coming. My wife and I decided we'd surprise everybody." "Where have you been?" I asked. It was then that I noticed something, thinking back, I noticed that every time he answered my question, it would always begin with the word Sir. "I've been deployed in Afghanistan, Sir. I'm in the Army. I drive one of those trucks, it looks a little like a Hummer. Oh, my parents are going to be surprised, and I get to see my son play football. I haven't been home for a year."

The CU student and the CSU preacher got real quiet. We realized, both of us, the sacrifice this young man had made. We realized the sacrifice that his wife had made, and his son, and his parents. And I said "Thank you for my freedom. I don't ever want to take that for granted. Thank you for what you've done for all of us. I imagine you faced some pretty hard things." He said, "Sir, yes sir, I have. I could talk a little bit about it now, but it's hard. But I'll tell you this - I had to grow up in a hurry. But it's a privilege to serve the country." A stranger, full of love, sacrificed time with his family to serve. The stranger was a hero.

The plane landed with a smooth touchdown. William said "It's different from landing in a C130. Sometimes those landings feel like you just got dropped out of the sky." The plane

got to the concourse gate and people stood to get off, and William could hardly wait to see his wife, the four-hour drive, the wakeup the next day to surprise his parents, and his son. The stranger was a hero. The CU student and I got out of his way and invited him to go ahead, as did the others who heard us talking, and the path opened, and he walked through it. It was like Palm Sunday. It was like Jesus coming into Jerusalem. The smile on his face never dimmed, although it did blur a little bit for me because I had tears in my eyes, thinking of William and his reunion, and the stranger he had been, and the hero he had become, once my eyes were opened, and I could see him as he was. How many strangers do we pass by without taking notice? If we got to know them, they would be heroes. Jesus was a hero. What keeps us from seeing? What keeps us from hearing? What prevents us from knowing?

I came back to Fort Collins and resumed my responsibilities here. Sermons to write, classes to prepare and teach, meetings to attend. My mother died the year I came here, that October, before I came in July. I wish she could have met you, but that was not to be. She had been a widow for over 30 years. In 1986, she married a family friend, Clyde, and some of you know Clyde died this past June, my stepfather. When we would visit them in West Virginia, they were just fun to be around. They were so full of life and love. Last Sunday was one of those 16-hour days for me. The services, the sermon, the Trunk-or-Treat in the parking lot, the Chili Cook-Off. I'd gotten through the morning well, the Trunk-or-Treat, the parking lot, children with costumes, one of them dressed as a banana. One of them dressed like a pumpkin pie. One of them dressed like a mean old lady. A little girl dressed like a nice old lady with a pillbox hat and a veil and a shepherd's crook. I don't know. Cars made to look like places where spiders live and snakes crawl and witches roam. Parking lot full of parents and children. It was wonderful. One car looked like a jail, and it had bars, and inside the trunk there was an inmate reading a book about great escapes. I put on my mask, you know, you saw it, some of you, a grotesque Frankenstein mask. One kid looked at me and said, "I know who you are. The mask is an improvement." Then the Chili Cook-Off, the crock pots boiling, thick chili, some of it would peel the paint off the walls. Some of it made from meats that could not be distinguished as to the animal from which they came.

The day was over at the church about 9:00. We went home. I looked at the telephone for a message. There was none. And then there was Caller ID. The screen indicated there was a call from Clyde English, Morgantown, West Virginia. My stepfather called. No message, but you see the problem. He died last June. The telephone indicated my stepfather called. He didn't leave a message. He called on October 24th, last Sunday, October 24th. All day I hadn't thought about my mother. It had been a busy day. October 24th, my mother was born on October 24th a 6 o'clock in the morning. My mother died on October 24th at 6 o'clock in the morning. My stepfather called at 6 in the evening, on the birth date and the day of my mother's death. First time I thought about her. I thought about my mother. I thought about her faith, then, I thought about how she loved college students. She worked at the University. I thought about how she loved people. I thought about how she saw good in people. I think she saw Christ in people. If my mother were alive and we could have talked, she would have asked, "How are you doing with that church? Are you and Kathy happy? How's your daughter? How's your grandson? Tell me

about the people. Tell me about the strangers who have become your friends." She maybe wouldn't say it like that. "Tell me about your heroes." My stepfather called. I don't know how that happened. Was it an old phone call, now being identified, or was it a call to remind me?

What's all this about? On the one hand, it's all about me, and I apologize for that. Unless you meet a stranger who turns out to be a friend, or you discover someone you didn't know, or once knew, and you discover some things about them you never saw. What a friend we have in Jesus, and unless you meet a stranger who turns out, when you get to know them, to be a hero, like Jesus, who gave his life in service, then it's not all about me. It's all about us. It's about how we have to pay attention, or we miss it. And if we miss it... Let me warn you, lest you miss it, the stranger you see, the one you pass by on the street, the one you stand in line beside in the grocery store, the stranger could be the risen Christ. And if you miss it, if it's there but you can't get it because you don't believe it could happen, let me warn you, on this Halloween - you too could get a wakeup call from the dead.