

“Strangers in the Night”

Luke 24:13-35

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

Frankfort, Kentucky

May 4, 2011

Communion Devotion

This morning our attention is drawn to a resurrection appearance of Jesus found only in the gospel of Luke. There are two main characters along with Jesus, but we only know the name of one, Cleopas.

It appears these two men had been in Jerusalem to observe Passover, and they witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. Evidently, they followed Jesus during his brief ministry and listened to him teach, watched him respond to people’s needs and shared a few meals with him. Without a doubt, they hoped he was the long awaited Messiah, but those dreams were shattered when they saw him die that horrible death on the cross and heard he had been buried.

Our story begins with these two men somewhere along their seven mile walk from Jerusalem to their hometown of Emmaus. They were talking about the events of the previous week when suddenly they were joined by a stranger.

He inquired about what they were discussing, which caught them by surprise. “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things which have taken place there in these days?” Cleopas said to the man who mysteriously joined them. “What things?” the stranger asked them.

They proceeded to tell this person about the crucifixion of Jesus, which had completely baffled them. Even the women’s account of the empty tomb that morning did little to clear up their confusion. As a matter of fact, this news left them with more questions than answers.

This prompted the stranger to remind them of the words of Moses and the prophets, which predicted this outcome for the Messiah because he would confront corrupt leaders and call them to repent. I’m sure his words were insightful and even helpful, but without actually seeing Jesus, it was going to be hard for these two downcast disciples to find any reason to feel better.

When they arrived at the home of these two men, Jesus acted as if he would continue on his journey. They insisted he stay with them through the night, where he would find food to eat and a safe place to rest. Finally, Jesus accepted their gracious offer of hospitality.

When they went to the table to eat after this long journey to Emmaus, Jesus assumed the role of host. Luke tells us Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it and shared it with them.

It was at this moment the disciples' eyes were opened, and they recognized the stranger in their midst was the very one who had been crucified and buried, Jesus. So excited were these two disciples upon discovering this, they ran back to Jerusalem in the dark to tell the disciples about their encounter with the risen Lord.

When he was at the table, he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, Luke 24:30-31a.

I pondered these words a long time last week. For me, they are the most intriguing in the entire story. Everything changes because of them.

Two questions came to mind the more I focused upon them. Why did this "aha" moment occur in the lives of these two disciples, and what difference did it make? Let me share some ideas with you to prime your pump.

Why, all of a sudden, did these two disciples recognize Jesus when they had been unable to do so for so long? It appears it was because they invited him into their home and offered him the gift of hospitality.

Their eyes would have never been opened had they not been kind to a man they thought they did not know. He would have continued on his journey, and they would have missed this sacred encounter. Their simple gift of kindness and hospitality made this revelation possible.

This point has not been lost on my friend and biblical scholar, Dr. Colin Harris. "Unless we see Jesus in the stranger," he writes, "we are not likely to see him anywhere else."

Anytime we are kind to a stranger, we open the door for good things to happen, not only for the stranger but also for us. This is a theme which runs throughout Luke's gospel, the champion of the least, the last and the lost.

Do you recall the parable Jesus told about the rich man and a beggar by the name of Lazarus in Luke 19? Lazarus would have been content eating scraps which fell from the rich man's table, but he never received them, much less an invitation to dine at his table. The rich man never noticed the beggar at his gate or shared any bread with him. When both men died,

Lazarus found his way to the bosom of Abraham, but the rich man ended up in hell, where he pleaded for the opportunity to return and warn his brothers.

Luke is the only writer to record this parable, which may hold a clue as to why he included this resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus. There are many similarities between the two stories; both mention food, a table, hospitality, or the lack of it, Moses, the prophets and resurrection from the dead. The difference between them is what happens at the table. The two on the road to Emmaus share their food with a stranger and discover that they have been in the presence of the Lord. The rich man took no notice of the beggar until he was in torment in Hades.

Could it be this resurrection story is a counterpart to the earlier parable? New Testament scholar Dr. Alan Culpepper certainly thinks so. Could it also be Luke's way of helping us to interpret the parable? Again, Culpepper believes it was.

"Fantasize for a moment. What might the rich man have discovered if he had shared his bread with Lazarus?" Culpepper asks. "It appears he could have had a divine encounter, just as the two on the road to Emmaus had, and it could have changed his life."

Anytime we are kind to a stranger, we open the door for good things to happen, not only for the stranger but also for us. Ask the two disciples on the road to Emmaus about this.

Why did these two disciples finally recognize the stranger in their midst was Jesus? They opened their hearts and home to him, which made this memorable encounter and revelation possible.

*When he was at the table, he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and **they recognized him.***

What difference did it make once they recognized who Jesus was? When their eyes were opened, what did they see?

Certainly, they saw the true identity of the stranger they had befriended, but they saw more than that. They also saw a bright future filled with hope and unlimited possibilities. No longer were they held captive by grief, confusion, uncertainty and fear. Jesus' resurrection energized them and set them free to dream and run and soar.

When you put your faith and trust in the Risen Lord, despair and hopelessness will never have the final word in your life. God will, and that word will be good. God will always open doors to a new and better life after your world has been shattered.

Is this the message you need to hear this morning? Can you identify with the despair of the downtrodden disciples on the road to Emmaus before they recognized Jesus? Has the harshness of life beaten you down and left you feeling hopeless? Then I encourage you to draw close to this table, much like those two disciples from Emmaus did when they invited Jesus into their home, and ask for God's help. I assure you God will welcome you with open arms.

When he was at the table, he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

I wonder what God wants to reveal to you and me today that has been hidden from our eyes, and what God wants to give us that has been beyond our reach. Let's go now to the table and see.