

Holy Habits: The Lord's Supper
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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Luke 24:13-35

When our children were very young, sometimes we played hide and seek in the house. Once one of the boys climbed into the clothes dryer to hide and it took a while to find him. When I finally did, I felt both inwardly delighted—what a great spot!--and outwardly stern and parental: “Honey, we better not hide in there anymore. Somebody might get stuck.”

I also remember the rising panic I felt when one of the kids had hidden and I couldn't find him. Hide and seek is all fun and games until your mom freaks out because suddenly you're gone, she can't find you, and you either (a) don't realize that she's truly alarmed; or (b) think it's funny that she's scared. Don't kids know it's not funny to prolong someone's anxiety?

We start with this picture of hiding this morning because hiddenness, concealment are aspects of Luke's account of the disciples on the Emmaus Road. We join those disciples on the road with the benefit of hindsight and Luke's narrative perspective. We know it's Resurrection Day—but the disciples don't. We know it's Jesus on the road with them—but these disciples don't. These disciples have just lived through the absolute worst week of their lives. Grieved and beat up, they trudge toward home. Seeking understanding and comfort. Seeking a way to put the pieces of their lives back together.

Luke tells us that one of the disciples is named Cleopas. We don't know for sure who the other disciple is. It could be another male disciple. But it's also possible the disciple is a woman. John 19:25 identifies a person named “Mary the wife of Clopas” standing at the cross of Jesus alongside his mother Mary, his aunt, and Mary Magdalene. So it's possible that the Clopas of John 19 is the Cleopas of Luke 24, and that this disciple pair on the road is a husband and wife.

“I can't believe he's gone,” Cleopas says as they walk along. “From everything he did and said, I thought he was the real deal, the one we've been waiting for. I really believed that he would be delivering us from the Romans, not dying on one of their crosses.” “I hated watching him try to breathe,” Mary says. “I was right there. It was just awful. He's always been the most full of life person I've ever known. Being around him felt like being closer to what's true and real and good somehow.” “Yes.” Cleopas agrees. “Remember how he raised that dead man in Nain? And the time he calmed the storm.... who can do things like that? You'd sure think Jesus could have stopped this whole train wreck if he wanted to.” “There's so much I don't understand. And what about the empty grave? Where is his body? Don't you wonder what the women—” “The women...” Cleopas says. “I don't doubt they *think* they saw angels. I know what they said they heard. But grief does funny things to people.”

“Hello there!” a voice calls. “Mind if I walk with you awhile?” They turn around. “Hello, and welcome. Yes, please—join us.” “I've been trying to catch you,” the traveler says. “You sure are focused on your conversation. What are you talking about?” Cleopas scowls. “Haven't you heard about Jesus of Nazareth? The news is all over town. He was a prophet, powerful in words and actions. But a few days ago our chief priests handed him over to the rulers and sentenced him to death by crucifixion. But we had hoped that he would redeem Israel.” Without missing a beat, the stranger responds, “You aren't very bright, are you? How senseless and slow your hearts are to believe what the prophets have taught! Wasn't it necessary that the Christ would suffer and enter into his glory?” And right there on the road the traveler begins to teach them, not just from a few verses, but from the whole scope of Scripture about the Messiah—who he would be, how he would be glorified.

I said at the beginning that hiddenness and concealment are aspects of this story. Maybe that doesn't bother you at all, but I'll tell you, it sure bothered me this week. Why are the disciples “kept from recognizing [Jesus],” as Luke says? And why, oh why, when Jesus catches up with these two perplexed disciples, doesn't he identify himself for them right away? Why doesn't he just say: “Hey friends, it's me! I know it's been a terrible week, but it's all OK now! I died, and I have risen!”

Shining the light of his resurrection into the darkness of their grief sure seems like the most direct path out of their suffering. Jesus could ferry those people across the chasm of despair and welcome them into wonder at his resurrection. But he doesn't do it, at least not right away. So why does Jesus hide? Surely as the sinless Son of God Jesus isn't taking some strange delight in hiding himself from people who love him. Surely he isn't being tricky or cruel. Surely there's some reason for it. What could it be?

A wider view of Luke's gospel can help us with that question. All throughout Luke, the disciples struggle to understand his mission. No fewer than three times in Luke Jesus talks about his coming crucifixion with the disciples. And they cannot understand it. Something important “was concealed” (Luke 9:45) or is “hidden from them” (Luke 18:34). And at his Triumphal

Entry, Jesus laments over Jerusalem, saying, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”

For the Twelve disciples, it seems to have been inconceivable that God's Messiah could suffer and die. They just couldn't see it. It seems equally inconceivable that to these two disciples on the Emmaus Road that Jesus could have risen again. Sometimes human eyes and human hearts can see only what they think they will see. They are unprepared to process evidence contrary to what they expect. If the disciples didn't believe Jesus' words *before* he went to the cross, how likely was it they would believe him *after*? For Jesus to assure them that it was really him, that he had really risen, that the work he was up to hadn't ended but was just beginning, some intricate work was called for. Some patient, hidden work.

So patiently Jesus hides in plain sight. He adapts his method and his message to his audience of beloved skeptics. He gets them ready to receive it. Far from taking some sort of perverse enjoyment in prolonging the disciples' grief, he comes alongside these two on the Emmaus Road, falling into step beside them, entering the conversation with what they've already been discussing, working the ground of their minds and hearts. “You know Moses and the prophets? Let's start with them and build from there. Let me show you how the scriptures speak of a suffering Messiah.”

As they walk and talk those disciples feel warmth spreading through their chests. Part conviction and shame. Have we misunderstood the scriptures? Part wonder and hope. Could God be up to something we've never thought of before? And part curiosity: Who is this man? How can he speak with such certainty?

Sooner than they would've thought they reach the village. The traveler seems to be going further. But after a quick consultation with Mary about the state of their pantry, Cleopas says, “Won't you stay with us sir? Hate to see you out on the road after dark.” They go in and Cleopas lights a lamp. Mary gets started on dinner—the bread unleavened tonight, because everybody's hungry. They settle in around the table. Their guest does the honors, taking the bread, blessing the Giver, breaking it, and giving it to them to eat. All the times these disciples have shared a meal with Jesus flash before their eyes. In cozy settings with just a few others. On hillsides with the multitudes. Jesus' way with bread at mealtime was always the same: Take, bless, break, give. And the fog clears. Their blind eyes and clouded hearts are opened: It's HIM! And just as quickly as they can see him, he vanishes. The two get up from the table, their fatigue and their dinner forgotten, to make the return trek to Jerusalem. News this good has to be shared!

When has God hidden from you? If you've walked with Jesus for any length of time, the odds are good that there have been stretches of time when you couldn't see him, you couldn't feel him, you wondered if he was there.

The couple journeying through infertility who become joyfully pregnant only to go in for a routine checkup and hear a doctor say, “I'm so sorry. Your baby has stopped developing.” The nineteen-year-old who couldn't wait to go to college who abruptly calls home and says she's dropping out. Her parents fear something deeply painful has happened in her life, but she's not talking about it. The social worker, teacher, or healthcare provider who persisted with grace under considerable challenges during the pandemic only to find the “new normal” understaffed and as tiring as ever.

The hiddenness of Jesus on the Emmaus Road is strangely assuring when we find ourselves reaching for a God we can't see. Because for those two disciples, and for us, just because we can't see him doesn't mean he isn't there. The disciples don't find him at the grave. They don't find him walking along the road. But finally they meet him around the table.

Maybe today you don't see him at your loved one's graveside. Maybe today you can't hear him in the preaching of his word. But as you trust in the faithfulness of the one who saved you to uphold you, he will feed your faith at this table—as certainly as you taste the tang of grape juice on your tongue.

In his book on Christian community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The congregation of Jesus believes that its Lord wills to be present when it prays for his presence. So it prays, “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest” – and thereby confesses the gracious omnipresence of Jesus Christ. Every mealtime fills Christians with gratitude for the living, present Lord and God, Jesus Christ...In their wholehearted joy and the good gifts of this physical life they acknowledge their Lord as the true Giver of all good gifts; and beyond this, they ask the true gift; the true bread of life itself...the one who is calling them to the banquet of the kingdom of God.”

Meeting Jesus here today doesn't undo everything sad, unjust, or mixed up. But meeting him here sustains us in the meantime. It assures us that Jesus is really with us even when we can't see him, and it points us ahead to the day when we will gather around the Lord's Table, when all will be well and healed and whole. Thanks be to God.