

**HOSPITALITY: THE ART OF BEING READY
WHEN GOD STOPS BY WITHOUT AN APPOINTMENT**

Easter 3: Confusion and Clarity

Luke 24:13-35

In this Easter season—we're now at the *third* Sunday of Easter—one of the things we find out as we dig around in the biblical stories is that Jesus wasn't the *only* one needing to be resurrected.

Thomas, the so-called doubter we saw last Sunday,
had to have his faith resurrected.
Peter, the Rock who crumbled under pressure, and publicly denied Jesus,
had to be forgiven and restored into relationship.
And every last one of the disciples,
who ran away into the night as soon as Jesus was arrested,
now were huddled together in a secret room,
cowering behind locked doors.
These dozen deserters were in *no way* ready
to become apostles and pillars of Jesus' new kingdom.
Their vision, their hope, their life purpose needed to be resurrected.

Today's Gospel story is a perfect example.
Two disciples walking from Jerusalem, home to Emmaus,
probably about seven miles west.
You heard this remarkable story read from Luke 24.
Turn to it if you'd like.
This story *begins* with two disciples walking west,
literally into the setting sun, heads hanging down,
and it *ends* with them running east, toward the rising dawn,
bursting with good news to share.
This is a resurrection story.
Not because there was a dead body that came to life.
But hope and vision which had died, was raised to life.
It's a dramatic story, and it all pivots around one particular moment,
when Jesus, who they didn't recognize,
broke the bread at their table, v. 30,
and their eyes were opened.

Some of you heard this story many times.

But let's back up a bit,
and think about what happened
before the two of them started trudging westward back home.
We don't know much about these two disciples.
The name Cleopas occurs only once in the Bible, right *here*.
His companion we know nothing about.
Some guess it was his wife.
But we *can* assume they were close to the inner circle of the Twelve.
At least, they knew right where to go in Jerusalem
to find their hideout.

We also know their state of mind on this walk home,
based on what they said to Jesus, the unknown stranger,
and v. 17 says, "They stood still, looking sad."
They were disilluminated.
They were disilluminated about who Jesus was,
after the awful events of the last week.
In v. 21, they said to the stranger,
"We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."
We *had* hoped.
Past tense. They *no longer* hoped.
They knew *that* would never happen.
They were disilluminated, disappointed, dejected.

Of course, to be disilluminated,
means that you've been under an illusion.
These disciples were under the illusion that Jesus was going to use
his miraculous power to overthrow their Roman oppressors,
and restore Israel as a sovereign, independent nation,
and sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem,
a throne that had been empty *way* too long.
They were under the illusion that they were following
the soon-to-be King Jesus of Jerusalem.
They were seeing something that wasn't there.
But *now*, when we find them in this story in Luke 24,
they are being disilluminated.

Of course, painful as it might be,
I suppose disillumination is better than illusion. *Right?*

If our lives are built on false perceptions,
it's *better* the falsehood gets stripped away . . . *right*?
Stripping *away* the false, however,
doesn't always make the truth come into focus right away.
Disillusionment is just the first stage toward
a more truthful way of seeing.

But it's an absolutely necessary stage.
Disillusionment is something we resist, *understandably*.
We resist it with all our might.
None of us want the world as we know it
to start shaking under our feet.
But *if* the world we know is built on an illusion,
disillusionment is something we *must* experience,
and we must embrace,
if we want to see things truthfully.

And, it's right *there*, in our state of disillusionment,
where the conditions are right for God to show up,
and begin to open up a new, and more truthful, world.

Most of the time disillusionment isn't a choice.
Disillusionment *happens* to us.
It *gets thrust* upon us.
Something happens that destroys the false reality
we'd been living under.

But to move from disillusionment to truthful clarity
requires a choice.
We need to be attentive, we need to be open,
and we need to be willing to surrender.

We *may* not need to choose to let go of our illusions.
But we *have* to choose to let go of our disillusionment.
To move toward clarity, we must be seeking it.

And *this* is why the story of the two disciples
on the road to Emmaus is so important.

Cleopas and his companion were *actively* seeking clarity.
They knew their old illusion of Jesus the conqueror
was never going to hold up.
As Luke 24 says, they "had hoped." But no longer.
But they had not thrown in the towel.
They had not quit Jesus altogether.
Too many strange pieces in the story didn't quite fit together.
They were *still* curious. *Still* seeking.
As they told the stranger on the road,
"some women of our group astounded us"
when angels told them Jesus was alive.
And there was the matter of the empty tomb
that some other disciples went and saw.

So yes, they were disillusioned, and dejected.
Jesus obviously wasn't about to overthrow the Roman oppressors.
But there was *something* going on.
They couldn't see it yet. But they were *open* to seeing it.

How do I *know*?
In this story is some irrefutable, tangible evidence
that they were seeking truth.
They practiced hospitality.
They practiced *deep* hospitality.

These traveling disciples . . . and we *today* . . . have choices
about how to position ourselves in a world
of uncertainty, of chaos, of confusion.
We can build walls, or we can practice hospitality.

I look at these two disciples, and I'm inspired.
They walked with a perfect stranger,
and listened to that stranger with open minds and open hearts.
And then they opened their home.
Yes, they were confused and depressed,
but not to the point of closing themselves off
to one who offered a new perspective.
Of course, this stranger wasn't a *complete* stranger.
They didn't know it was *Jesus*,

but they knew he shared their faith and their scriptures.

Their eyes were opened when Jesus broke the bread.

But they would never have *gotten* to that point with Jesus,

had they not been ready to give and receive hospitality.

They would have never *gotten* the clarity they sought,

if they had assumed a posture of defensiveness
and self-protection.

They had every right and every reason to turn inward,

to focus on their own disappointment and defeat,

to protect themselves from any further pain

by *not* letting that stranger into their lives.

They could *well* have let the stranger go on his merry way,

and could have gone into their own house,

and locked the door—

just like the door was locked

in that secret room back in Jerusalem.

They could have chosen to just close themselves off,

and crash.

Nobody would judge or criticize them in the *least*,

if they wanted to go into survival mode,

to give themselves some time and space to recover.

But as a result of the practice of hospitality,

God showed up.

And, as it *usually* happens,

God did not make an appointment in advance.

God did not wait until they cleared their schedule

and got *back* to him . . .

to let him know that Tuesday after next, between 1:30 and 3:00,

would be a convenient time to meet.

No, as usual, God stopped by. Unannounced. Unscheduled.

But because hospitality was in their blood,

Cleopas and his companion were *ready* for God.

I don't mean they had the beds made, and food in the oven.

I mean they were ready to set aside their own agenda,

and be open to the other.

They were ready to hear an alternate interpretation

of the events of the past week,

and what a more faithful response might *be* to those events.

Our society is sorely lacking in people

committed to the practice of deep hospitality.

It's no wonder we are so polarized.

It's no wonder that fear so quickly overtakes us.

It's no wonder we resort to shaming and shutting down our opponent,
rather than engage in a respectful struggle for truth.

It's no wonder that we have all but lost the skill of civil discourse.

It's no wonder that Tea Party folks, and the *rival* Coffee Party folks
have never sat down at the same table,

and taken a sip of each other's preferred beverage.

It's because deep hospitality is not a value in our culture.

It's this same resistance to opening ourselves to the other,

that makes us less likely to be ready

when *God* stops by without an appointment.

When I was still in my twenties, I was pastoring in Gainesville, FL.

I think in my youthfulness, I may have been hospitable more often.

More ready for the unexpected encounter.

One Sunday morning, I was closing up after church.

Irene had already gone home to fix lunch for company.

I was catching a ride home with our guest.

Just as I was locking the church door,

a disheveled and miserable-looking man appeared,

and said he wanted to "talk to the pastor."

In our downtown church, this was actually a frequent occurrence.

The next sentence was going to be a request for money.

The *reason* would vary.

Needed to buy some food to eat.

Needed to get a bus ticket.

Needed a place to sleep that night.

I was just about ready to brush him off,
and point him to the homeless shelter, St. Francis House,
But instead, I opened myself, just a crack,
and sat down on the bench with him, ready to listen.

I don't remember his whole story,
but I remember the part where he said,
"I'm planning to kill myself today."
I spent at least an hour talking with him.
Our lunch guest got involved in the conversation.
Eventually, we took him home with us for lunch,
and had him break bread *with* us.
By the time lunch was over, he had changed his mind.
Our other guest and I took him back into town.
He took us to the place he had hidden his handgun.
We helped him dispose of all his ammunition.
And then took him to the airport,
for a flight back to the family he was running from.
He declared his handgun, and checked it in properly.
He paid for his own plane ticket. He wasn't indignant.
And he took off for home,
ready to give life another chance.

I have no idea what became of him.
But the practice of hospitality,
literally kept this man alive that day.
As I look back at that encounter and what *I* experienced from it,
I can also say God stopped by, without an appointment.
That time, I was ready.

I know there have been many times since, that I *wasn't*.

I think that part of our problem,
as I said in my Easter morning sermon,
is that we're not always ready for resurrection life.
We may not actually *want* to see the risen Jesus more clearly,
because we have a hunch what it might mean.
We might *rather* go on with life as we know it, undisturbed.
We might not be looking for an encounter that will change our lives.

We might not wish to be stretched beyond our point of comfort.
Hospitality, by definition, is risky.

I also need to say that it *is* appropriate to draw boundaries.
Along *with* hospitality, comes the responsibility to be discerning.
Not every guest is a welcome guest.
Not every visitor comes speaking with the voice of God.

Don't we wish it was easy to know, in real time, which was which.
In our seasons of confusion or disillusionment,
when God stops by, and we answer the door,
more than likely God won't be in the form of
a glowing figure in a white robe,
with flowing hair and a deep voice,
telling us exactly what to do next.

Good discernment *is* crucial.
It might mean a long and careful and communal process
to tell whether, in *fact*, this *was* God that stopped by,
or whether it was something we ate,
or something *more* sinister,
trying to lead us away from the future God has for us.

So here is what I think I'm ready to commit to,
and I invite you to join me in this commitment.
I *want* to be deeply hospitable.
I *want* to be ready when God stops by without an appointment.
And I want to be discerning.

So . . . I will choose to surround myself with a core community
of persons in covenant with one another,
who *together* worship God,
who *together* have a high regard for the scriptures
who *together* are committed to keeping Jesus Christ—
his life, teachings, and sacrificial death and resurrection—
at the center of our life together,
and who *together* will walk boldly into the world
in all its beauty and brokenness,
ready to both give and receive the practice of hospitality.

By hospitality, I mean being attentive, open, and yielded.

In *that order*.

Attentive, so that I will at least notice when God shows up.

Open, so I will lower my defenses and listen more deeply
to God and God's messengers.

And *yielded*, so that *when* I grasp what God is saying,

I will have the courage to lay down my own agenda,
and go where God is pointing me.

I cannot be faithful to the call of Christ,

if my posture is one of defensiveness, rather than hospitality.

if I walk into the world with a slick, pre-packaged message,
rather than first embodying the Good News of Christ
with a compassionate, yet bold, presence.

May we all join together in this commitment
to be ready when God stops by.

—*Phil Kniss, May 8, 2011*