



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MAY 4, 2014
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

When Jesus Disappears | Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

Last week we heard John's story of what happened a week after Jesus' resurrection when Thomas finally saw Jesus and ran his trembling fingers over the wounds on Jesus' wrists—a "touch of faith" that led to his belief and worship. This week, we find Luke stepping back—now two weeks by our time—to the evening of Christ's resurrection. Much had happened in three days. The horror of the crucifixion was over but the silence of the tomb was equally distressing. Afraid for their own lives, the disciples hid away in that upper room waiting for all of the tension to die down. Mary and a few other women went to anoint Jesus' body but found the tomb empty. She immediately returned to tell the others and Peter and John ran to the tomb to verify the news. Angels appeared and insisted that Jesus was alive but it was not until Christ himself met Mary in the garden that anyone believed it. Once again, she rushed back to the upper room to let the disciples know that she had seen the risen Christ.

An afternoon of joy, praise, wonder, and speculation followed. Late in the day, the room began to empty as followers went home. Two of them, Cleopas and his friend (whose name we do not know) began their long walk back to the village of Emmaus. They had plenty of time to talk about what had happened for their home was seven miles away—at least a two hour walk by most standards, though some of you have a much faster pace!

Along the way a stranger joined them. Who was he? A merchant? A craftsman? A robber? Where was he going? Noticing that they had been engaged in a rather intense conversation, he asked what they were discussing. They were surprised that he seemed unaware of all that had happened concerning Jesus and shared their sad tale of the death of the one on whom they had placed all their hopes. Even though they had heard the reports that he was alive, their hearts were still heavy with grief. Then this stranger filled in the gaps of the story and, beginning with the prophets, detailed God's meticulous movements through history that had brought them to that day.

When they reached the village of Emmaus, the stranger continued walking but his traveling companions prevailed upon him to stay with them as the day was almost spent. They invited him to share supper and, although he was the guest, he offered blessing and broke the bread for them. It was in that moment, likely because of familiar words and gestures, that it all clicked and they recognized Jesus. At the same time, however, he vanished, disappearing from their sight.

What would you have done? Would you believe that Jesus had simply vanished before your eyes? Would you have pretended that nothing at all had happened? If you and I were at that table, would we have agreed that what had happened was so bizarre that we should never speak of it again? Or, might we have reacted as did Cleopas and his friend, admitting that something was going on as they walked together. They felt an affinity for this man and all that he was telling them. As they put it, their hearts burned within them. Would we, like them, have returned immediately to Jerusalem, but surely at a much faster pace?

Something happened in that moment when they recognized who Jesus was and Jesus disappeared. It was faith. Up until that point, they did not know what to make of all that had happened. Once they saw Jesus as the risen Christ, however, it was clear to them. When he was physically with them, faith was not necessary, but when Jesus disappeared, faith began.

All of us have had some experience that brought us to faith, some assurance that Jesus is who we believe him to be. Some of you have told me of a dramatic visual or audible experience, an unmistakable visitation by the Spirit of God. Others of you have shared with me the way in which your conviction has grown steadily through the years, your faith being affirmed almost daily in the ways you have experienced God in your lives. Some of our stories are no more bizarre than what happened at Emmaus while and others of our stories are similar to those of a majority of believers who have come to faith through the centuries. At some point we all see Jesus for who he is and faith begins.

What happens after that moment is equally important. Mary ran to tell the disciples that she had seen the risen Christ. Peter apparently had an encounter with Christ, though we do not know what it was. Cleopas and his friend hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others and, at some point, Jesus appeared to them all that evening and the following week and later on the shore of the sea. After every occasion, the disciples shared the news of what they had experienced.

The Book Thief is a movie adaptation of a book by the same name. It tells of a young girl's life in World War II Germany. At the age of twelve, the girl is adopted by a middle-aged couple after her younger brother dies and her mother is forced to give her up. Obviously bright, Liesel can neither read nor write, but her new father teaches her how to do both and new worlds flourish before her. As Hitler's extermination campaign progresses, a young Jewish man takes refuge with the family and hides in the basement to avoid capture. Liesel shares her love of reading with her new friend and learns much from him about the war. One day he asks her to tell him what it is like outside since he cannot leave the basement. Her initial response is to report that "It is cloudy." "No," he says, "tell me in your own words. If your eyes could speak, what would they say?" It is then that the girl's poetic spirit is awakened and she discovers her own gift for telling stories with color and light, movement and emotion.¹

It is a good question for anyone attempting to tell a story, "If your eyes could speak, what would they say?" And for people of faith, a similar question is appropriate: "If your heart, could speak, what would it say?" Cleopas and his friend felt their hearts burning as Jesus unfolded all that God had done through him. When he disappeared and they felt their faith for the first time, they had to tell the other disciples. John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed as he heard the Gospel preached in a fresh manner, and a new religious movement was begun. Over and over, when God's people experience faith, they have told their story. If your heart could speak, what would it say?

Not all of us have unexplainable experiences of Jesus appearing and disappearing, but we do have the testimony of scripture and the witness of other believers to reveal to us that Jesus is risen and is our Lord. Our response is to speak, to speak with our lives. As the choir affirmed earlier,

"Alleluia! Alleluia!" is the Easter hymn we sing!
Take our life, our joy, our worship as the gift of love we bring.
You have formed us all one people called from ev'ry land and race.
Make your church your servant Body, sent to share your healing grace!²

Like the two disciples at Emmaus, we long for Jesus to stay with us, at least long enough to open our eyes and warm our hearts. Our faith, however, is to act on what we have seen, to share what we have felt. When your heart speaks, what will it say?

¹Brian Percival, director, *The Book Thief*, Fox 2000 Pictures, 2013 based on the novel by Markus Zusak.

²Herman Stuempfle, Jr., "Who Are You Who Walk in Sorrow," 2000.

May 4, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Each day of life is an opportunity for us to recognize your presence and experience your grace, Holy God, but in the beauty of springtime, your generosity is especially apparent. The new life springing forth around us serves as a reminder of the joy we know in celebrating Christ's Resurrection. The variety of colors and textures and fragrances in every yard and field signify your love of diversity and the artistry with which you created our world. Warm breezes and gentle rains soothe and renew the earth just as your Holy Spirit offers the comfort and vitality of your constant presence with us. Every corner of our world bears the imprint of your creative handiwork and every creature sings forth your majesty. In the midst of such splendor, Gracious God, how can we not be filled with wonder and gratitude as we recognize the abundance of gifts which give meaning to our lives and move our hearts to worship and praise?

But we confess that there are days when even the warmth of the sunlight and the multitude of blessings we receive from you cannot overcome the darkness and discouragement in our lives. There are days, even seasons, when we search desperately for a sign of your nearness but find only doubt and loneliness. Sometimes the clamor of noises that surround us and the confusion of fears and anxieties that swirl within us cause us to strain to hear faint echoes of your voice or catch fleeting glimpses of your reflection in our world.

Give us eyes to see and ears to hear so that your presence is evident to us in all the circumstances of life, Merciful God. Attune our hearts to sense your closeness in both the joys and challenges we face, believing in your promise that you will never leave us or forsake us. Help us to know, in the guidance of your Word, in the companionship of one another, in the breaking of bread around your table, in the smallest expression of kindness or the grandest of miracles, that you abide with us and that your love is unfailing.

And equip us, Gracious God, to reflect the light of your presence for others who, because of illness or grief, poverty or hopelessness, violence or injustice, have long felt distant from you or wonder if you are there at all. Fill our hearts with compassion and courage instead of condemnation and fear. Strengthen our hands to reach out with acceptance and healing rather than promote division or lash out in anger. Guide our feet to places of service, and enable us in all things to make evident your life and light so that others might experience the grace you have so freely given. In the name of the Christ who came to dwell among us and by the power of your Holy Spirit who abides with us still. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
Associate Minister