

Luke 24:13-35
April 6, 2008

South Plains
3rd Sunday in Easter

The Jesus We Don't Know

I read this past week that in Japan, researchers have developed a robot that looks exactly like a live human being. In England, another expert predicts that in the future, people lonely for human companionship will develop relationships with robots. I suppose that's not too terribly different from people who sleep with their dogs or people who insist on having their morning cereal in their own favorite bowl. What may be a little surprising is the report that when the Japanese robot has been tested, ordinary people just a few feet away do not recognize at first that it is a robot.

That failure to recognize what is familiar is a striking feature of the resurrection appearances in the gospels of Luke and John. Luke tells us that Cleopas and another disciple spend Easter afternoon with Jesus as they walk the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. But, the disciples do not recognize their Lord. Even when they describe the powerful ministry of Jesus and his death by crucifixion, it does not occur to them that they are telling the story to Jesus himself. Our expectations often determine what we see.

But, I wonder if something else is going on in this story. I wonder if the story illustrates how we fail to recognize the presence of Jesus today because we, like

those two disciples, are unprepared. Cleopas and his friend are not ready to see that this stranger is indeed Jesus, the risen Christ. Jesus reveals himself to them by preparing them.

Debbie Blue, a Minnesota pastor, raises an interesting question. Why did Jesus choose these two disciples to receive this revelation? They are nobodies in the New Testament. She suggests they were chosen because they were the guys who didn't show up every week, the ones most likely to doze off when the sermon was long or to be doing cross word puzzles in synagogue. In other words, Jesus wanted to insure that the resurrection was understood by unlikely disciples. Just as his whole ministry surprised the religious establishment, his resurrection surprised his closest followers.

Perhaps more surprising than that is the way Jesus chooses to reveal his identity. He uses scripture and sacrament in the context of ordinary hospitality. Here's how it happened:

These two guys decide to get out of the city, to exchange the Passover crowds and excitement of Jerusalem for a quiet day in the country village of Emmaus. Along the seven mile walk, they are talking about the events of the past weekend. Pretty soon a stranger falls in step with them and wants to know what has gotten them talking. They stop for a moment, amazed at the question. "Are you the only stranger in

Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" they want to know. That leads to a short rehearsal of Jesus' life and death, concluding with the story told by the women about seeing angels who said that Jesus is alive. But, they say, nobody has seen him.

Jesus responds first by calling Cleopas and his friend "foolish." Then, he starts teaching. He begins with Moses and goes through all the prophets. As he reads scripture, all the suffering of the Messiah was necessary as the prelude to his glory. Now you might think that as much teaching as Jesus did, anyone with even a casual acquaintance with his ministry would recognize his style. But, Luke tells us "their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

When they arrive in Emmaus, Jesus makes like he is going farther down the road, but the two disciples want to hear more. They invite him to stay with them in Emmaus; and he does. At table that night, he takes bread, blesses and breaks it and gives it to them. In that moment, their eyes are opened and they recognize him. And, just as quickly as they see it is Jesus, he vanishes from their sight. That's not quite the end of the story, but it's a good place to pause.

In the book of Genesis, chapter 18, three strangers are entertained by Abraham and Sarah in their old age. The strangers promise that when they return, Sarah shall have a son. Eventually, those two childless

old-timers figure out that they were entertaining none other than the Lord himself. In Matthew 25 the Son of Man separates humanity as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And, both groups are surprised to learn that their compassion or their lack of compassion was shown not only to the hungry, the naked and prisoners, but to the Son of Man himself. Earlier in Luke's gospel, a poor man dies and goes to heaven while rich man dies and goes to the torments of Hades because the rich man did not recognize that poor Lazarus, begging at his gate, was his ticket to heaven. When he pleads that Lazarus be sent from the dead to warn his brothers, the reply is blunt, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead (16:31)."

The miracle of resurrection is not enough. They and we need the scriptures. And, we need the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We need to gather around the Lord's Table where the risen Christ is our host. In the blessing and breaking of the bread; in the sharing of this meal, our eyes can be opened to recognize the Lord.

All this happens to Cleopas and his friend in the context of a conversation where they testify about what's been happening in their lives. The turning point of the story comes when they invite the stranger to stay for supper. Simple hospitality makes word and table come alive.

When Habitat for Humanity builds a house, they do the work of locating a lot, gathering materials and volunteers, and finally choosing the new home-owner. They take one more step that is critical. They invite the prospective home-owner to come and work alongside the Habitat volunteers. In the process of building that house, it becomes a home for someone who does not have a home. By the time the work is finished, the new owner has been transformed from guest worker to host. She hosts the Habitat volunteers at the dedication of her new home. Jesus starts out as the guest at Emmaus. In the end, he has become the host.

That is not the end of the story. Cleopas turns to the other disciple and says something like this. "Remember when he was talking to us on the road, when he was opening the scriptures. My heart was burning. Was yours?" We replay this sacrament again and again with the hope of burning hearts, with the hope of scripture that comes alive. And, when it does come alive, we need to tell the story to someone else about the Jesus we thought we knew, but finally recognized.