

South Plains Presbyterian Church  
May 8, 2011

The resurrection appearance of Jesus along the road to Emmaus taps into the everyday experience of recognizing or not recognizing our friends as well as the hope of that very extraordinary experience of having a vision of Jesus. Only Luke tells this story. The disciples are downcast and confused, so much so that they do not realize the man near them on the path is Jesus. With great sensitivity and more than a little irony, Jesus, realizing that his disciples are sad, engages them in conversation with an innocent question, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along looking sad (v. 17, alternate reading)?”

When I was nineteen, I had been wearing eyeglasses for about two years in order to see the blackboard in school. I should have been wearing them on a particular fall day as I was walking past the UVA Hospital. The young woman walking toward me turned out to be a person I had dated several times and a girl I really liked. But, I did not expect to see her there, and I did not have my glasses. Thus, she did not come into focus for my nearsighted eyes until just as she moved past me. I quickly turned around and stammered out some kind of apology; but our relationship never recovered from my failure to recognize her immediately and warmly.

Luke recreates that moment of confused joy when we have had some important encounter and we realize that we almost missed it completely. I can understand how the two disciples failed to recognize Jesus. Not only were they kept from seeing who it was, their minds were distracted. After the resurrection, a number of people had seen Jesus in a number of different situations. It was not until they compared notes with each other that his followers were able to fully believe he had been raised and was alive. And it was not until Jesus himself explained the Hebrew Scriptures that his followers began to understand that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the long hoped-for Messiah.

I think the same can be true for many of us. We do not fully believe until we have been able to compare our experiences with others; until we have studied the scriptures for ourselves; and until we have had that flash of recognition, that “Aha! Moment” when it dawns on us that we really can believe that the storybook Jesus is in fact the Christ. Until that moment, we may be discouraged because Christianity does not give us the certainty we want about faith, disheartened about the confidence we need for living, or depressed because we don’t have the enthusiasm we imagine other people enjoy. I think that discouragement is what the two disciples were feeling as they made their way to Emmaus. Other people in their group were excited. Other friends were telling stories about the empty tomb that were certainly intriguing. But, until one shares a similar experience, one feels a little left out.

I suppose Jesus could have confronted them more directly: “Cheer up fellas! It’s me. I’m alive.” But ever the teacher, Jesus chooses to use this time together to explain how the death and resurrection of the Messiah had been predicted by Moses and all the prophets.

Jesus knew that discouragement and depression cannot be cured by a simple announcement of good news. We'd like to have a quick cure; but it's not possible and probably not healthy. When news of the killing of Osama Ben Laden reached our homes and streets late last Sunday, there was jubilation in places, and with good reason. A tyrant was dead. A kind of justice had been done. American persistence in pursuing Ben Laden was rewarded. Within hours, however, other emotions began to surface. There was worry about retaliation. There are concerns over what direction Al Qaida will take in future. And, most poignant was the response of families who had lost loved ones on September 11, 2001. Their sense of satisfaction and gratitude over that one death did not wipe away for a minute the sadness they feel at the many other deaths over the past ten years.

John Whitehead, founder of the Rutherford Institute in Charlottesville, responded last Monday with a column one of you shared with me last week. Whitehead notes that war is not about territories or oil or even about winning. War, he said, is about killing. That is reason for a profound sadness that cannot be cured by patriotism or entertainment or technological gadgets that insulate us temporarily from the killing. On this Mother's Day it behooves us to recall that at least 22 mother's sons and daughters were killed last Sunday along with Osama Ben Laden. And, that is only a snowflake in the avalanche of death that began ten years ago with the fall of the World Trade Towers.

A single piece of good news does not cure the discouragement of a world with too many deaths. Nevertheless, the gospel looks at this greatest reason for sadness and makes three bold assertions: We don't have to stay on this path. There is a better way. And, the introduction to this better way is Jesus Christ.

First, the gospel says we can change. Our fate, our destiny is not fixed. From Adam and Eve in Genesis to the book of Revelation, people have the freedom to choose, to change, to walk in a different direction. Circumstances may seem to dictate otherwise, but both scripture and human experience record example after example of people who have turned around. The two disciples had stumbled out of Jerusalem perhaps looking for something else, something they could not name.

Frederick Buechner writes, "The road to Emmaus is that place where we go to escape whatever it is we need to escape-whether it is our job, our ornery friends, a demanding, ungrateful family, or that horrible gnawing grief over life and love lost." The disciples knew they needed to escape the discouragement of Golgotha and the confusion of these crazy stories about Jesus alive.

But, how could they really escape that reality? That's the second assertion of the gospel. The grace of God provides a better way, a better world. A young mother comes to church occasionally with her abusive husband. A mysterious feeling draws her back again and again. Eventually, by the grace of God she escapes the marriage and chooses Christ. All too often women in that situation feel hopelessly trapped. Yet, she escaped and is receiving her

Master's degree this month. There's no other explanation for that kind of turnaround except the gracious work of the Holy Spirit making a way when there was no way.

The key to that way is Jesus, born to Mary in Palestine 2000 years ago, crucified by a conspiracy of Roman and Jewish leaders, and raised from the grave by the power of God. Jesus announced that the power of God was good news for the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed. For a powerful minority of the world, people like you and me, this gospel is interpreted metaphorically. We are poor in spirit, captive to materialism, blind to injustice and oppressed by very little more than our own neuroses. But, for the majority of people, Jesus' message is literally a promise of life as it was for that young woman; and as it is for the fastest growing churches in the world, those in developing nations. Either way, Jesus is the way out of discouragement and confusion and into the kingdom of God.

On this Mother's Day, I think of mothers who poured their energy into rearing children with a sense of patriotism and duty. Mothers who marched in protest when their sons disappeared for opposing a dictator. Mothers changing diapers in the hope that the little child in their arms would grow up and raise their own family in peace. Mothers who laughed and cried and traded stories with anyone who would listen to the wonderful things their children have done. Mothers proud and sad.

Last week I was given a little journal that belonged to James E. Cook, supply pastor at South Plains from 1913 to 1919. It's filled with sermon titles, dates and financial notes from the years he served several churches, including South Plains. Mary Beth Smyth has a similar journal her father kept when he was a Presbyterian minister near Roanoke about the same time. I must admit that it's hard for me to identify with a pastor whose salary for part time work at South Plains in 1917 was \$41.67 a month, about enough for a tank of gas today. We are alike in one way, however: we both have kept magazine clippings for inspiration. Inside the front cover that I opened for the first time last Tuesday, I found a number of clippings about, of all things, "Motherhood." One thing that has not changed is the need to remember the mothers in the world.

Critics wonder why women, especially mothers, fill the majority of pews in Christian churches. I think the explanation is simple: mothers know discouragement and poverty and oppression. And, they recognize relief and happiness in Jesus Christ. The good news is that you don't have to be a mother to escape discouragement and recognize Christ. Rich or poor, male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free – life in God's kingdom, resurrection life that overcomes us with joy is available in Jesus Christ.