

May 4, 2014

God Sightings: The Road to Emmaus

Why Did You Come to Church?

Luke 24:13-35

Opening words: According to Acts 1:3, Jesus walked the face of this world in his resurrected state for 40 days. During that period he did two things. First, he proved that his was a bodily resurrection. In other words, he was not a ghost. Second, he taught about the kingdom of God. Did you know, scattered throughout the New Testament, are eleven resurrection stories? Each one of the Gospels contains at least two resurrection stories. Acts has one resurrection story and First Corinthians mentions four different accounts in the fifteenth chapter. On the one hand, there are accounts of Jesus appearing to a single individual. (1 Corinthians 15:6) On the other hand, there is an account that Jesus spoke to more than 500 at a single time. (1 Corinthians 15:7) The only common denominator in these stories is the individual's love for Jesus. This morning's story is the perfect example.

We find ourselves in the last chapter of Luke. This story has been called the most dramatic of the resurrection appearances. As with all of Luke's stories, it is masterfully told. Our Gospel lesson for today is Luke 24:13-35. Two believers encountered the resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Today's message is called *Why Did You Come to Church?*

Luke 24:13-35 ¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" ¹⁹ "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. ²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus

continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

According to the text, it was Easter. Two people, one of them named Cleopas (verse 18), are traveling from the road that runs between Jerusalem and Emmaus. That road only covered seven miles. As they walked, they talked about the events of the week. On the minds of everyone was Jesus. You can't blame them. The last week had been an emotional roller coaster. Just think about it for a moment. They had been on an emotional roller coaster. Emotionally, they couldn't handle any more. However, they must. Some were now saying Jesus had defeated death. It was too good to be true. It would take a miracle for a dead man to return to life.

As they walk along, another traveler joins them. It is Jesus. According to verse 16, his identity is hidden. I am not really sure what that means. Some say they didn't recognize Jesus because the sun was in their eyes. Some say they didn't recognize Jesus because of their emotional state. Some even say they didn't recognize Jesus because the Master changed physically during his painful hours on the cross. Some say God had distorted their sight. It doesn't really matter why they didn't recognize Jesus. The only thing that matters to us is that they didn't recognize him. Jesus does what I do so well, act dumb. He acts like he doesn't have a clue. Jesus inquires about what had been happening and the two are completely disgusted with his ignorance. Yet, by the end of the story, their eyesight is restored. Verse 31 says, "*Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.*" Can I be honest with you? I am not really sure what that verse means either. However, I do know this. Everything changed once these two experienced the resurrected Jesus. If you don't believe me, then look at the story one more time.

In the opening verses of the story the spotlight is squarely on the travelers. We know they had some basic knowledge of the week. They had some basic knowledge about God's divine plan. First, they knew Jesus came from God. Second, they knew Jesus was the key to a better future. Third, they knew the chief priests and the rulers turned Jesus over to the authorities to be crucified. Fourth and finally, they knew Jesus had died. Now, they had heard the reports of Jesus' resurrection. However, they weren't sure if they could believe the reports. At this point in the story, the travelers are in a spiritual funk because they don't know what they could believe. The entire mood of the story changes once they recognized the resurrected Jesus. They illustrate for us the simple point. Once you experience Jesus, everything changes.

In just a few days I will celebrate my 57th birthday. I am turning into a gray-headed old preacher in front of your eyes. I like being my age because I have learned a few things along the way about life. I have been a pastor of a church for 32 years and I have learned a few things along the way about the church. I have learned that the story from the Emmaus Road is really the story of the church in our time. Listen to what I am about to say. Our churches are filled with all kinds of things. We have a surplus of things. Also, our churches are filled with people who are filled who have the basic knowledge about the truth. Our possessions and our knowledge mean nothing until we experience the resurrected Jesus. Could it be the mainline Protestant church in America is dying because we have a lack of people who have experienced the resurrected Jesus? We are no different than those travelers on the Emmaus Road. If we want our church to continue into the future, then we must experience the resurrected Jesus again! Let me ask you this question.

Why did you come to church? There is not a single answer to that question. People come to church for all kinds of good reasons. We are going to look at three good reasons this morning. However, if you aren't going to church to experience the resurrected Jesus, then you are going to church for the wrong reason. So let me ask the question again. Why did you come to church?

World Relief

Early this week, I woke up to discover that tornado season had officially begun. You saw the reports. A storm system passed through the Southeast, producing tornadoes from Oklahoma to Mississippi. Thirty-six people were killed. The hardest hit population center was Tupelo, Mississippi. A call went out for volunteers to help the survivors. One of the groups that responded first was Operation Blessing International. This is their mission statement. *OBI is a nonprofit, humanitarian organization dedicated to demonstrating God's love by alleviating human need and suffering in the United States and around the world.* They function in 23 countries on a daily basis. It is just one more arm of the church that helps the suffering. They are not alone. Our tradition is no stranger to helping the needy. The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) is second to none when it comes to aiding the needy in our world. How concerned are you about the needy in our world?

If you have a heart for the needy of this world, it would be easy to come to church to be part of an organization, which helps with world relief. How can that be a bad thing? However, if you came to church only to get involved with world relief, then you are coming to church for the wrong reason. There is only one real reason to come to church. You must come to church expecting to experience the resurrected Jesus! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Social Needs

On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first black man to play major league baseball. Breaking baseball's color barrier, he faced jeering crowds in every stadium. While playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, he committed an error. The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the fans jeered. Then, shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie Robinson and faced the crowd. The fans grew quiet. Robinson later said that arm around his shoulder saved his career. There is nothing better than a good friend. Have you ever needed the support of a friend to continue? How many friends have you made at church?

It would be easy to come to church to just see your friends. You can make friends anywhere, but your church friends are the best. They are the ones that stand by you when things are bad. They are the ones that know your whole family. They are the ones who know your complete past. They are the ones who share your core values. I love my job for many reasons. One of those reasons is the people that I talk to every day. I think you are some of the finest people I have ever known. However, this is the truth. If you came to church just to see your friends, then you are going to church for the wrong reason. There is only one real reason to come to church. You must come to church expecting to experience the resurrected Jesus! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Family Duty

Karen M. Fox is a member of the St. John's Church in Mt. Aetna, Berks County, Pennsylvania. For years that church was part of the United Church of Christ, but somewhere along the way they voted to become an independent church. The denomination, or the lack of a denomination, is not why she stays. She stays for one reason, family! Her family has been part of that small membership church for five generations. She was baptized there in 1958. The first family member to be part of that congregation was her great-great-grandparents, Nathan and Elizabeth Gruber. For five generations, her family has been baptized, confirmed, married and buried from the sanctuary. Nearly every Sunday, she walks through the surrounding cemetery and visits the four previous generations of family members who have passed.

Have you ever been part of a family church? The church may not be the largest or the most contemporary. It may be located out in the middle of the wilderness or in the heart of the city. Preachers came and went with mixed reviews. However, your family has always been there. You know the truth. Without your family, the church may have closed. However, your family refused to let that happen. They worked hard, and in exchange, that sacred spot continued for future generations of family members. Family baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals wouldn't be the same in another location. Have you ever attended a true family church? It would be easy to come to church just to keep a family legacy alive, but that is the wrong reason.

You must come to church expecting to experience the resurrected Jesus. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

According to the text for this morning, two believers were walking down the road. It was Easter, and they knew the events of the previous week. They knew Jesus had died. They were trying to make sense of it all. Then, something more confusing happened. They heard the rumors that Jesus had come back to life. Knowledge was not a problem. They knew the facts. However, none of it made sense until they experienced the resurrected Jesus for themselves. It isn't just their story; it is our story. Nothing really makes sense until you experience the resurrected Jesus. The Master once said of himself, "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one come to the Father except through me.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"