

A Easter 3 4.26.20

Luke 24:13-35

Focus Statement: Jesus meets us wherever we are.

A few weeks ago in Horrocks I was approached by a masked man. I was minding my own business, trying to find cumin, when suddenly this strange man came around the aisle.

When he saw me he stopped, staying the recommended six feet away, and, his voice muffled and breathy through the painter's mask he was wearing, said to me, "Hey Kjersten."

It took me a minute, but it turns out it was my friend Gary. I've known Gary and his wife for years; they were some of my first running friends in Battle Creek. His wife and I ran the TC Ironman together last summer, we are in the same Tuesday night running group. Or we were, when group runs were still a thing. Moral of the story, I know Gary really well, he is definitely not a stranger, and yet when he came around the corner and greeted me last week in a painters mask, I had absolutely no idea who he was and why he was talking to me.

The mask thing is weird and is definitely taking getting used to. Now, don't get me wrong, I fully support it. I've read the science, I'm glad our governor has as well, and I'm all on board with the minor inconvenience of looking like an old-timey wild west bandit for the sake of protecting my neighbors. But I'd never realized how dependent I am on facial expressions of the whole face, not just the bridge of your nose up, to both recognize people and judge reactions.

It's weird, but I'm also experiencing a weird and kind of wonderful camaraderie with my fellow mask-wearers. Several weeks ago now, when the CDC was just hinting that masks

were going to become the recommendation, I tried an experiment. First I went to Meijer wearing my mask, and I felt silly. Then I went to Horrocks and I didn't wear the mask, and I felt like kind of a jerk. From that point I decided I'd rather look silly and it was masks for me. Now when I go to Horrocks, proudly repping one of the mask Travis's mom made for us, I feel like I'm part of Team No Triple C—Team No Triple C, by the way, being a club I made up, Team No COVID in Calhoun County. I smile at the Horrocks person through the plexiglass screen, we make our normal small talk about what obscure vegetable I'm buying, she tells me a joke. The masks keep some anonymity, but they also bring a sense of community, we are both committed to the work of keeping each other safe.

What got me thinking about masks this week was this Gospel story about the road to Emmaus. The text tells us that two disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus, "talking with each other about all these things that had happened"—all these things being Jesus' crucifixion and the women's surprising discovery of the empty tomb—when "Jesus himself came near...but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." I've always wondered how the disciples could have not recognized Jesus, but when people show up in places we don't expect, places we don't think they belong; it can be hard to place them. A couple years ago one of my very good seminary friends happened to be passing through Battle Creek and he popped into my office unexpectedly, and it took me a while to place the bearded man in my doorway. He had to introduce himself to me, and then I was super embarrassed that this person whom I had spent hours trying to muddle through Greek and systematic theology with was so out of context standing in my doorway that I couldn't place him. And if I couldn't recognize Brian, who I knew was alive and well, I just thought

he was in Minnesota, imagine the disciples disconnection when Jesus, whom they had seen put to death and buried, starts walking along beside them. That is not the context they were expecting.

And while we're talking about the disciples, let's also talk about where they were going. Luke's Gospel places them on the road "to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem." Or about 20 miles from Jerusalem, depending on which manuscript you're reading. But this really doesn't matter because, remember, the writer of Luke probably lived in Turkey, his directions were always a bit questionable. For Luke locations were always more theological than geographical. The point wasn't that the disciples were going to a specific village, the point was they were getting out of Jerusalem and going elsewhere. There's an amazing Frederick Buechner quote that I shared during the Wednesday bible study that describes Emmaus as: "the place we go in order to escape—a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, "Let the whole damned thing go to hang. It makes no difference anyway" ... Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends." The disciples were traveling to Emmaus because they were grieving. They were sad and frightened and discouraged. They had given up hope. We'll hear later in Cleopas's unintentionally ironic recounting to Jesus of who Jesus was that they "had hoped that he—Jesus—would be the one to redeem Israel." These aren't just words. From the infancy narratives way back in the beginning of Luke's Gospel we saw Zechariah, Simeon,

and Anna, all pronouncing Jesus as the one Isaiah had foretold, and Cleopas shared with Jesus that they'd believed those promises. Only to, as far as they could see, watch those promises not just dashed but literally beaten, hung on a tree, and buried in a tomb a mere three days before. They were heartbroken.

And what I love about this story is that it was on the road to that place. The place that you go when everything has failed, when every promise you had was broken, when everything seems lost, it was on the road to that place that Jesus met them. And not just met them, but came alongside them. Walked with them. Listened to them. Asked them questions, heard their response, and answered them. Opened the scriptures to them and "interpreted to them the things about him in all the scriptures." They didn't recognize him, but that didn't stop Jesus from being with them, from teaching them, from serving them.

And then they got to the place where they were going, and they invited Jesus to a meal. Not, mind you because they knew who he was, but because social norms required that they do so. This was the "wear a mask and stay six feet apart" of their time. It was the expectation of being a good member of society. Jesus accepted the offer and they had a meal together. And all the commentaries I read were careful to point out that while we want to read Eucharistic tones into this text, into Jesus breaking bread, blessing it, and giving it to them, that really wasn't what was going on here. This wasn't worship, it wasn't communion, it was dinner. Dinner like we have around our own tables every night.

But it was in that table fellowship, in that breaking of bread and sharing of food that the text tells us “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.” Which is such a weird detail, but I think it tells us something else crucial about this post-resurrection time we live in, which is that in the already and not yet of this time we get glimpses of the holy. Moments when Christ breaks through and we see, just for a moment, with total clarity. I find that as off-kilter as things are right now, I have those moments often. The neighbor kid’s chalk art, or a colleague who calls just to check in, or that nod of appreciation across the plexiglass of the grocery store that we are wearing these masks for each other. These quick connections are glimpses of the divine, they are moments when I see Jesus in the breaking bread of fellowship, and when they are over I find myself reflecting, “was not my heart burning within me...”

So this week, as we continue on this strange path that we are walking, alone together, I invite you to be on the lookout for these moments of clarity. Maybe this year we are more able than ever to see the resurrected Christ in our midst as we too journey along an unknown road to an unknown location. Thanks be to God. Amen.