

Seeing Jesus
May 4, 2014

Luke 24:13-35

In the Gospel reading read this morning we hear about two people on a journey with Jesus. On this journey some significant things happen. The mood of the journey changes.

It begins with two of Jesus followers going back to something they knew all too well - being dejected, being disappointed. Probably a lot like the loser of a Carolina-Duke game, or name your favorite rivalry. Only this was much more serious than a ball game.

They had put all their hope in Jesus to bring them success, to bring them freedom from the Roman oppression that was a constant drag on their lives. But that hope had been wrenched from them, and now the one they believed in to be their Messiah was not with them.

Their problem was that they had defined whether Jesus was successful or not by what they saw, what they were experiencing right now, and what others thought success is.

These two followers had defined Jesus' success as redeeming all of Israel. They were expecting to be freed from the authority of the non-Jewish rulers, Rome, and then for Jesus to be their leader.

But now they couldn't see how this could happen. Jesus appeared to be out of the picture. God had let them down again. So they had lost hope!! As you read the text you can almost sense them walking along a dirt track, head bowed, scraping their feet and moaning that life was a mess, that life was tough, and the glimmer of hope they had in Jesus had now disappeared.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt disappointed, dejected, like there was little or no hope???

Hope is a powerful thing. A number of years ago researchers performed an experiment to see the effect hope has on those undergoing hardship.

Two sets of laboratory rats were placed in separate tubs of water. The researchers left one set in the water and found that within an hour they had all drowned. The other rats were periodically lifted out of the water and then returned. When that happened, the second set of rats swam for over 24 hours.

Why? Not because they were given a rest, but because they had hope! Those animals somehow felt that if they could stay afloat just a little longer, someone would reach down and rescue them.

So why did these two men on the Emmaus road feel hopeless?? Because they had lost hope that Jesus was alive. They had lost hope in Jesus being their Messiah. And because of that lost hope, they couldn't recognize Jesus being with them.

But as we read in verse 15, Jesus had joined them on the journey and was right beside them! So it is not a matter of Jesus not being with them! It is a matter of them not recognizing Jesus!

And I believe this happens today, at times, to every one of us. Jesus is always walking with us, listening to us, talking to us. He has promised to do that. Remember his words as he gave the great commission to the disciples – “I am with you always.”

But we don't always recognize that he is present! And why not?

Well, sometimes it's because he is not responding at the pace we want him to respond! Sometimes he isn't responding to us in the way we want him to respond, the way we expect! Sometimes we have in our mind what Christ's presence with us should look like, act like and be like.

And if things don't go exactly that way, the conclusion we often jump to is that God has abandoned us or hasn't answered our prayers.

Some years ago a wealthy businessman undertook an experiment. He dressed up as a homeless man and went to the businesses and bank where he was a regular customer.

And what happened really upset him. In every instance the service was bad in some cases appalling. He said, “I was treated as if I was worthless”

So he withdrew his money from the bank and stopped being a customer of some of the businesses. When he was asked why by one manager, he told him about his experience The response was, “oh, but we didn't recognize you!”

Jesus however, points out to the two followers on the road that their hopelessness is not because God has deserted them. Rather it is because they were assuming that Jesus did not have to suffer!

They were assuming that Jesus should always appear as the winner, be always successful, according to their definition of success.

So how do we recognize Jesus? I want to concentrate this morning on one of the most important ways - by reading scripture!

It's important for us to read scripture regularly so we can see who Jesus truly is and how God is working. Studying scripture helps us recognize Jesus.

Now, I don't want to jump to any unwarranted conclusions or falsely accuse anyone, but I have to say that, judging from interest and attendance at our Bible studies, it would be very easy to conclude that not a lot of our folks in this church have a strong interest in studying the Bible.

I understand that some may not like to drive or come out at night. Yet I see most of those same folks whenever there is a meal or a program at night. So, I wonder.

And, some will say that they do read and study the Bible on their own. Good – I hope that’s the case. And there are many ways to do that – daily reading plans, CD’s, videos.

But I would also say that it is important for you to interact with others when studying the Bible, to learn from each other, to help each other in your spiritual journeys, and to test how we perceive the Bible.

Regular Bible reading and study helps us get a true perspective of Jesus. It is essential to help us truly recognize Jesus.

And here I want to add a couple of caveats about our Bible reading and study. Those of you who have ever been in any of my classes know that I mention these often and feel very strongly about their importance.

The first one is – don’t read the Bible with hindsight. Now what exactly do I mean by that? I mean that in studying scripture it is important to put ourselves into the time place and context of the writers and the events, not to read them from a 21st century perspective.

Some examples: When we read about the events of the crucifixion, it is easy to miss the angst and the anguish the disciples and followers felt because we know the outcome. They didn’t and we need to understand it that way.

When we read the writings of Paul, it is important to understand that so much of what he wrote and said was colored by his strong belief that Jesus was going to return very soon, and that when he said don’t bother with or worry about certain things, he wasn’t necessarily telling us not to, it was because he didn’t think there was enough time left for him and his contemporaries to do so.

We know better. He didn’t. It is important to keep that in mind in reading Paul

Again, referring to Paul. One of his most misunderstood comments had to do with the role of women in the church.

His comment that women should keep silent in the church has been used by some groups to say that the Bible teaches that women cannot be ordained ministers or serve in other leadership roles.

But what Paul was really referring to was the seating arrangement in the worship houses of his day, in which men traditionally sat at the front and women at the back.

They didn’t have amplified sound systems in those days, and often it was difficult for those in the back to hear, so the women would call out asking what was said, thus disrupting the service.

Paul was saying to the women, don't disrupt the service with your comments. Be quiet in church – ask your husbands when you get home. Quite different from what many have tried to make it say.

In fact, a closer reading of Paul indicates quite clearly that he had the highest respect for women and commended them often for their work in advancing the faith and the early church.

And I could cite numerous other examples, but the point I want to make is that to truly understand scripture we have to read it from the perspective of the time in which it was written. Only then can we really understand what it might have to say to us today.

A second caveat I would offer is this: study the Bible for information, not affirmation. By that I mean that we should not approach our Bible study with pre-conceived notions of what we want it to say and then search for passages that we can make support those notions.

Rather, we need to read scripture with an open mind and open heart, to be able to receive what God has to say to us through it, rather than what we want God to say. I can tell you that those are very often not the same things!

And then, be open also to the fact that God may have different messages for different people, even through the same passage.

It really doesn't help the Kingdom for Christians to argue, as some do, that, "my interpretation is right and yours is wrong." There are certain things about our faith that we would all likely be in agreement on. But there is so much that is not a "one size fits all."

None of us should ever get to the point of theological snobbery where we think that God has entrusted secrets and knowledge to us that no one else has, or get trapped in our own little box with just "me and God."

Back to what I referred to earlier – one of the real joys of our Bible studies to me is to hear and explore different understandings of scripture that people have. And hearing and considering seriously those differences is how we grow in our faith, and how we can truly recognize and encounter Jesus as he comes to each of our unique personalities.

Scripture demonstrates for us how loving, how caring, how welcoming God is. And the Bible clearly shows us how God demonstrates His love for us through Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

We know that Jesus' resurrection is foundational to our faith, And in being foundational to our faith it not only guarantees that our sins are forgiven and before God we will be declared innocent, but it also gives us the hope and power to live our daily lives as Christians, in God's grace, in a world that at times can be pretty rough.

And it is the reason for our commitment of our lives to Christ.

So no wonder when Jesus revealed himself to the two followers that their life changed. They were now confident that Jesus was alive. And in him rising they were gaining much.

It changed their mood. Their hope had now been restored. Seeing Jesus caused them to change direction, to go back to Jerusalem and tell others.

What about us? How does Jesus' resurrection affect how you think, what you do and how you interact with others? It is important for us to meet up regularly with each other in worship, in Bible studies and in fellowship time.

We should always remember that Christianity is not an individual religion. We don't keep the good news for ourselves nor should we be left on our own to look after ourselves.

In today's Gospel reading the two followers didn't continue on their way to Emmaus when they recognized Jesus. They went back to the other followers and shared their experience. If you were asked to share something about Jesus, what would you share??

Each of us is called to share our stories with one another. Not to argue and debate doctrine, but to be witnesses to each other about how Jesus Christ is affecting our lives and the hope he brings.

Once in a church I'm familiar with a number of families came together for a meal, study and fellowship. For some of them it was the first time in a long while that they had sat as a family, studied the Bible together and talked about their faith in the risen Christ, and what it meant for them.

At the end of the night one of the young people in the group said, "I now have a different perspective on life... I see that Jesus has truly affected my father's life. And that life is not just about the past, it's not just about now but it is about the future that is in front of me, a future where Jesus is always present and this is important to my family."

This is witnessing, a term that we often misunderstand or even completely shun. It is not about proving who has the most correct or sophisticated or "best" theology. It is letting others not just hear about Jesus, but to experience Jesus and the grace that he brings to each person.

Of course, in order to share, we have to have something to share. We must first recognize Jesus for ourselves, and let him make a difference in our lives

There are many ways that happens, and we'll talk about more of them in the future. But I do hope and pray that we will see the importance of both individual and shared Bible study as an essential key in recognizing and knowing our Lord.