

April 30, 2017 • Third Sunday of Easter • Faith in Action Sunday



“Seeing the Grace in Front of our Noses”

Sermon by Rev. Larry Young

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Most of us can identify with the experience of intently looking for something and then discovering it was right in front of us the whole time. We can’t find a needed credit card—and then discover it’s right there in our billfold where it belongs. We struggle to figure out how we’re going to get everything done on a hectic day—and suddenly it dawns on us how to relieve the pressure. Or perhaps we’ve been pondering the meaning of life for a lifetime—and one day it suddenly becomes clear to us, and we wonder how we had missed it when it seems so obvious. We may often find ourselves searching for God’s grace in various situations; and how often do we find that the grace we need was right with us the whole time.

On that first Easter Sunday, the two travelers on the road to Emmaus were in need of some grace in a time of personal spiritual disillusionment. Their hoped-for Messiah has been crucified by his religious and political enemies; and that, they feared, was the end of the story. And in their despair they were unable to recognize Jesus when he joined them on the road. Now presumably they knew what he looked like. They likely had become followers of his ministry to the point that they believed him to be the promised Messiah. And so if their Messiah was now dead, they could not imagine him walking on the road beside them. They simply did not have eyes to see that.

Note that Jesus sizes up their vision problem right away: they were looking for the wrong kind of messiah. They were looking for a political emancipator who would throw off Roman rule and restore the national glory of Judah—not one who would suffer the indignity and defeat of being crucified. They were pursuing the grace of freedom from political oppression. What they had been given was a Messiah, yes—but one that had to suffer himself and experience the seeming defeat of a crucifixion. And the grace he brought was the assurance of a spiritual victory and the fresh revelation of God’s intentions and love for humanity. So Jesus proceeds to interpret the scriptures about himself that spelled out the kind of Messiah he was. In so doing, he was giving them a new framework for understanding the Easter events. Now we can well imagine how uncomfortable the two travelers must have been at being told they had got it all wrong. They spoke later about how their “hearts burned within them”—from embarrassment no doubt as well as being fired up with new hope. But Jesus was pushing them to a major revisioning in their understanding of Messiah, and they were still unable to recognize him on the road. But note when the moment of recognition finally happens. The two men invite Jesus to stay with them in their home; and there, in the intimacy of a shared meal, in one of the most personal settings of their lives, as Jesus breaks and shares bread with them, the penny drops—and suddenly Easter becomes very real. They have experienced the Easter Jesus right where they live—close up and personal, we would say. Jesus had taught he was the bread of life. And in his breaking of the dinner bread, they make the connection. Now they have a new vision for their lives; and they are so fired up about it that at once they get up and head back to Jerusalem to share their experience and their new faith with Jesus’ disciples.

In the Easter season we celebrate God’s grace for life that bursts into the world as we realize that human sinfulness and death itself could not defeat the good news that was revealed in Jesus. And I believe the Emmaus story is telling us the risen Christ is always present with us and life-giving grace is always there for us—often right in front of our noses! Our challenge is to see it for what it is so we can claim it and be blessed by it.

One reason we may not recognize the grace in front of our noses is that we, like the Emmaus road travelers, look for the particular form of grace we think we need rather than the grace God wants to give us. We presume we know what grace will look like in the life situations we face; and if that form of grace doesn’t come, we conclude we’ve been denied, and may even regard God at fault for not delivering for us. So we may decide that attaining a certain level of material comfort is what we need—or achieving a certain level of professional success—or resolving our personal conflicts—or passing that test that seems so important to us. And if these desires are not satisfied, we may think grace has passed us by. So often we look for the grace of healing, for ourselves and for those we care about; and we find it hard to see any grace when these prayers are not answered as we wish. We pray for the grace of safe travel and safety from personal harm and loss. But if our prayers are not answered as we hope, does that mean no grace has been given to us?

The writer Andre Dubus in his essay "Broken Vessels" reflects on his journey back from a near-fatal accident in 1988. It was an auto accident that led to not only the paralysis of his legs but also the loss of his marriage, his family, and for a time, his work as a writer. In the face of such loss, what kind of grace could even be imagined? The answer took time to emerge; but at last he began to realize that his capacity to know love was a greater reality than the despair of all his losses. It was the kind of love that could only emerge among the shards of loss—a love "as strong as death", as the writer of the Song of Songs put it. Dubus writes, "My crippling is a daily and living sculpture of certain truths: we receive and we lose." And then remarkably he adds, "we must try to achieve gratitude . . . to embrace with whole hearts whatever of life that remains after the losses." And for him what remains is living in the love that gives his life meaning even in the face of loss.

Most of us are not likely to experience loss at that level; and none of us are likely to go after tragedy and loss as a road to grace. But when such times come to us, in whatever form, that's a time to keep ourselves open to whatever grace may be there for us—because very likely that's a time God will choose to use. So many personal accounts bear witness that when life's challenges push us deeper, we come to a more profound sense of God's working in us. And that's something we don't want to miss.

Lewis Smedes who taught at Fuller Seminary put it aptly in these words:

"Grace is not a ticket to Fantasy Island; Grace is not a potion to charm life to our liking; Grace does not cure all our cancers, transform all our kids into winners, or send us all soaring into the high skies of sex and success. Grace is rather an amazing power to look earthly reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, feel its cruel cuts, and yet feel in your deepest being that it is good and right for you to be alive on God's good earth."

A beautiful spring like this should be a time for our taking in the grace that lies in the beauty of the natural world. Winter rains have produced an unusually lovely array of plants and flowers this year. And that beauty is meant to nourish our souls, even as it also bears witness to the love and care of our Creator. Yet it is all too easy for us to be so preoccupied with our cares and concerns and daily agendas that we don't appreciate this grace that is often literally in front of our noses. I walk every day around our neighborhood; but often I catch myself thinking about the things I need to get done that day and miss out on the flowers and trees and the ocean view. If Jean is with me, she'll often stop and point out the colors and beauty I'm not paying attention to. For all the wrong things that are part of our world, and all that seems mundane, we are placed in a world of much natural grace that is there to nourish us.

And how often grace seems to come to us through other people—and often when we least expect it! When I was an active pastor, I would often wonder about what impact I had in my various meetings with other people. Often such calls and meetings seemed so routine. I remember making a hospital call one day on a terminally ill man whom I had seen only once before. What does one say to someone facing death whom you don't know at all? Other family members were gathered around the bed and they asked me to offer a prayer. So we joined hands and I drew a breath to pray when suddenly the man himself started praying. It was a prayer for his family gathered around him; and here he was, the patriarch, lifting them up in prayer for perhaps the last time. I sensed how surprised and touched they were by this; and my own prayer must have seemed anticlimactic, but I offered it anyway. And then when I had finished, the man drew me to himself in his bed and kissed me, to my great surprise! But I knew then that he had received grace, and I knew that I had received grace, because God was at work in that situation in ways we could not have anticipated.

I think God is so often poised to use our encounters with others as a channel of grace if we have eyes to see. And often that grace is shared both ways, which means we need to believe we may be the means of grace to others, as well as they to us.

Grace comes to us in many forms. I know how much I value the grace of music, and I look forward to finding it here in our worship as well as other places. Drama and literature can be meaningful forms of grace. We may well find grace in using our particular talents and abilities creatively. Acts of service can bring grace to us as well as those we serve. Indeed all of life is filled with the potential for grace; and prayers of thanksgiving for grace received should always be a part of our devotional life. But we need to develop discerning eyes to see fully the grace that's there. We live in a culture that so often focuses on the grace it sees missing than the blessings that are present. But we who follow the risen Christ are offered a more positive outlook beyond such cynicism. When we are intentional about looking for the grace in front of our noses, we're going to find it more often—because it's there!

Easter, I believe, is God's ultimate word that grace comes out on top. Our calling is to learn to trust in a God of grace, and so let go of our anxieties as to whether life will bring us blessing. The poet Denise Levertov put it in these words:

As swimmers dare to lie face to the sky,
And water bears them,
As hawks rest upon air and air sustains them,
So would I learn to attain free fall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
Knowing no effort earns that all-surrounding grace.

That's the kind of grace Easter bears witness to—and that's the kind of God who merits our trust. Amen!