

“When Seeing Isn’t Believing”

Luke 24:13-43 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might believe what the eyes of our hearts tell us and share the joyful wisdom we receive as we break bread together. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

How has Christ been made known to you in the breaking of the bread? It is still Eastertide, my friends, and I want us to rejoice in this story. But I also want us to explore the lessons it has for us about how the presence of God becomes real in our hearts and in our community. There are so many different levels and forms of knowing and believing illustrated in this passage, and the interplay between them can teach us some important things for how to be an Easter church in this difficult Good Friday world.

So if we’re going to learn from a story, let’s go through the story, because it’s a good story. As the story begins, all these two disciples knew was what they had been through. They were re-hashing the past. When Jesus appeared, their eyes were given new information, but they didn’t understand who they were seeing. This is, of course, not the only instance of people not recognizing the Risen Christ. Mary thought he was a gardener, after all. But this is an important first point. For these disciples, seeing was not believing. Hearing apparently wasn’t either, since we might have assumed they would recognize his voice, but they didn’t. It can be helpful for us to think about the

times in our lives when our minds have rejected the evidence that is right in front of us, either because it revealed something unexpected, we'd been through too much trauma to process our experience accurately, or some other reason.

But the story doesn't linger here. Moving quickly past the failure of the eyes and ears, the story introduces the failure of information. Jesus had asked them what they were discussing, and as they sadly told him all about how Jesus had died, he suggested their grief was misplaced and began, as Luke puts it later, to "open the scriptures" to them. At this point, Jesus is offering them a Bible lecture. And it's beginning to take effect, as we learn later. The eyes of their hearts were beginning to open, burning with a dawning realization that hadn't quite emerged yet.

That slow burn must have been enough to remove their fear and sadness enough to offer hospitality to this stranger, because they invited him in to stay for dinner and the night. And that was the key. As they told their friends later, it was when he took the bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them, that their eyes were finally opened. He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

There are a lot of ways of knowing presented in this story, and it seems to take all them together to get us there. As the story continues, the author of Luke seems a bit caught up on a visual, proof-oriented approach to belief. He pulls out that same evidence that we heard last week from John's gospel, that the disciples should know it was Jesus because they could see the wounds in his hands and side. But Luke ups the ante even a little more by telling us that Jesus ate broiled fish right there in front of the

disciples. How many ghosts do you know that eat? If you want the show “Ghosts” on tv, you well know that ghosts would like to eat, but sadly all they can actually do is smell our food and wish they were able to eat it. See, Luke is saying, he’s obviously risen, because look how he’s eating! And not just easy food like pita bread, but fish, where he probably has to make sure to avoid the bones and everything.

What’s interesting here to me is that Luke is sort of missing the point of the story he’s telling. He is trying to lead us to belief, but he’s making the mistake of thinking there’s only one way to get there. We have already heard how seeing is one of the least reliable ways to arrive at an understanding of something. Adding more knowledge doesn’t always do the trick either. The eyes of our hearts can be opened somewhat by what we see and hear and learn, but there is a deeper experience that is often required before we can truly believe, “be-liebe,” “be-love,” or give our hearts fully to something. And this story would imply that the experience of breaking bread in community is one of the best ways to get there.

I wonder how Christ has been made known to you in the breaking of the bread? I wonder when you’ve had times when you couldn’t believe what you were seeing? We live in an era in which we need to be very careful about whether we believe what we’re shown or not, because our society is full of artificially-generated images that don’t tell the truth. Those disciples had trouble believing because what they were seeing was “too good to be true.” And while we often also have trouble accepting the grace of God because our weary, cynical hearts just can’t embrace it, we also need to be wary because

there are things out there now that are, in fact, too good to be true. Take the case of the baby peacock, for example. A few weeks back, this image was circulating around social media, purporting to be a baby peacock. Now wouldn't it be a fantastical world if that were, in fact, what a baby peacock looked like? It's completely adorable. Those eyes, those vibrant colors. It brings a whole new meaning to the X Files slogan "I want to believe." Because you don't quite, right? You see how precious it is, and yet your gut is whispering to you that something is off. You inject some information – like say, your memory that it's important for baby birds to not be easy for predators to find, so it would be a problem if they were this brightly colored – and you begin to realize this is too good to be true. [slide] And indeed, that is the case. This is not what a baby peacock looks like. It's not even what someone painted, wishing this is what baby peacocks look like. It's what came out when someone fed the words "baby" and "peacock" into an image-generating computer program. And suddenly, the world rather than being uplifted by creative artistic endeavors is just more misinformed. [slide] There's a reason pictures of actual peachicks weren't circulating on the internet until now; it's because they're not that adorable. They're just baby birds, brown and little and cute in their own, non-over-the-top way.

There are many ways of knowing and understanding in this story, and many of the lessons this story offers are things we can benefit from today. [slide] We need to learn to listen to our hearts and our guts. When something seems too good to be true, we need to examine whether it's because our hearts have built up barriers to avoid

disappointment or because our gut is telling us something is off. And most importantly, we need to ask for help. As my husband and I were reminded last night, sometimes even our gut needs an assist. We need to turn to community, for a heart check and a gut check. We need to join in the breaking of the bread, so God's truth can be most clearly revealed to us. We won't all arrive at belief the same way. We probably won't even have quite the same understanding of what it means to say Christ is risen. Some will lean toward Luke & John's proof-oriented approach. Some will keep studying, so as to open the eyes of their hearts to what is dawning in their souls. Some will come along for the ride and let the experience of the journey take hold of them.

When we share in the breaking of the bread, that which is good and true claims all of us. Christ will be made known to us. Seeing will become less important than being. Agreeing will become less important than loving. The truth will become more important than appearances. Community will become more important than having the right answers. Our fear and sadness will turn to rejoicing, and the burning in our hearts will invite us into hope. Hallelujah and Amen.