

The 3rd Sunday of Easter

May 8, 2011

Luke 24:13-39

“Seeing Jesus”

the Rev. Michelle Slater

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.

The writer Marianne Sawicki offers a wonderful definition of what is meant by the word “church”. She writes that church is the community that first creates a **context** in which the Risen Christ will appear, and then, has the competence, or ability, to **recognize** the Risen One when he appears. When we wonder, here or in any other part of the church, if we are “effective” or “successful” at being church, it is good to be reminded of Sawicki’s definition, that an authentic and faithful church has the ability to create an environment in which Christ will appear, and then to know him when they see him.

I think that is why the story of Jesus' appearance to his friends, on the road to Emmaus is one of my favourite stories about Jesus. Because of the elements, the things that are key in that story to creating the context for the risen Christ to appear and to be seen and recognized.

First and most simply, the disciples are together. They have come together, in their hopes and dreams, and now in their disappointment and heartbreak. Rather than isolating themselves, they are sharing their grief with each other, wondering if they can trust the unbelievable good news that "certain women" have told them about Jesus' tomb being empty.

And we do the same, don't we? We come together, we walk alongside each other. Not just on Sunday mornings, but all through the week, whether in prayer groups, or book studies, or choirs, or groups working on various projects together, or coffee groups. We gather. And not just when we're doing fine, when we've got it all together, when we're celebrating and rejoicing. But also, and especially, when we're not doing fine, and things are falling apart. Somehow that seems like an especially powerful way of seeing the Risen One, when our hearts are broken and grieving, and our dreams are shattered, and we come together to tell the truth to each other and ourselves, about what a mess our lives are. Like the early disciples, our gathering together, just as we are, to tell the truth about our lives in the presence of God's love creates the space for the Risen One to appear.

Then, as they walk along the road to Emmaus, they discuss not only their friend Jesus and what he had meant to them, but also reflect on the Hebrew Scripture, on the hopes and promises within scripture that they had put such trust in. And so do we. Just like the disciples, we listen and find within the stories of God and God's people, stories like our own. Together, we can point out how similar they are, sometimes, and point out signs of God's presence and action in the Scripture's stories, and in our own. Another way we create the context for the Risen Christ to appear and to be seen.

Then, the disciples meet a stranger and offer him hospitality, because they have learned from being with Jesus before his death to welcome the stranger, to offer food to the hungry, and give shelter to the traveler. As they sit at table together, their guest takes the bread, and blesses it, and breaks it, and gives it to them. And they recognize the Risen Christ. Their eyes are opened. They finally become aware of his presence in the breaking of the bread. And just as they become aware...he disappears.

We too create the space in which the Risen Christ can appear, most powerfully, by offering radical hospitality. In order to make room for the Risen Christ, we intentionally make room for others, welcoming them in Christ's name, sharing food, sharing prayer, sharing generosity of spirit and place and money and time – giving of ourselves.

And then, when the disciples' eyes have been opened and they see the one they thought was dead and gone, alive again, they go out with joy and wonder, to tell others of the risen Christ that they have experienced, of the risen life that they now know.

And so do we. Once we have created the space for the Risen One to appear, and once we have experienced that risen life for ourselves, we can't help ourselves. We just have to go

out and tell other people, our friends and neighbours, the people we work with, and the people at the gym, of this new and surprising life we've found.

The practices of following Jesus, of making space to encounter and see the Risen One, have not changed in two thousand years. Gathering together...telling the truth about our lives in God's healing presence...listening to God through Scripture...radical hospitality and inclusion...going out to tell and witness to others.

I can't help but notice what's not there, though. There is nothing there, for example, about building maintenance, or committee meetings, or fundraising appeals, is there? I can't help but wonder if at this point in our history, some of our sense of purpose has been displaced.

It's true that the church has always been located in particular places and times, there's no doubt about that. Once the earliest house churches became too big to meet in someone's courtyard, single purpose meeting spaces for congregations began to be built. So that the ability to make space to see the risen Christ, to encounter the living God, could be aided and enhanced.

Like many congregations, our building plant here at Dunbar Heights United was originally a great asset and resource for creating the context to see the Risen Christ, to encounter God and have our lives and our living transformed. Yet what was once a great asset and resource has become a distraction, a burden and even a hindrance.

It has become those things for lots of reasons, mostly the effects of time and gravity on an old building that has also not been maintained the way it should have been. But the reasons it hasn't been maintained hasn't been for lack of commitment, or dedication; it is because of lack of resources, both financial and human energy.

We live in a culture that is increasingly "post-Christian", where the forces of secularism, individualism and rationalism are making religion less and less attractive to more and more people. Add to that the increasing pressures on many families and people, and the view that religion is more like "the icing on the cake" of an already full and frantic life, rather than a deep and vital well of abundant life, and we find ourselves in the same position of almost all other mainline Protestant churches: in decline.

Sixty years ago, the United Church of Canada was opening one new church a week, with a strategy of having one congregation in each high school catchment area. For the time, with the cultural dominance of Christianity and the reality that almost everyone you knew went to church, that made sense.

But it doesn't make sense now. We just have far too many churches for too few people to maintain. And so our buildings, which are now requiring more and more of our energy and money and time, are no longer an asset but a burden, and a distraction. What was supposed to enable us to create the context for Jesus to appear, to heal and transform our lives, has become what distracts us from that mission instead. Keeps us from being able to focus on gathering, truth-telling, hearing God in Scripture, radical hospitality, and witnessing.

These are all things that your Strategic Ministry Planning Team have been pondering, praying about, and wrestling with. We have a direction that we think God is calling us, in order

to rediscover ways to focus more faithfully and sustainably on creating the context for Christ to appear and be recognized, not only in our own lives and contexts but in our communities and the whole world.

Now we need you, all of you who are committed to this community of faith and the God you encounter here. We need you to explore and think and pray about the direction that the team has discerned, and if you can, to do that with us this coming weekend. Friday night, we'll meet here at our church to share a meal together (remember how Jesus appears when we eat together?), and take a look at the Strategic Ministry Plan as a whole.

Then on Saturday, we're meeting at Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church Centre (West 28th and Alma) to look more deeply at various areas of the plan, and at the stewardship that will be needed to bring it into being. Your comments, questions, suggestions, improvements will all help shape the final plan that we hope to present to the congregation for approval in early July. A plan for a vital community of followers of Jesus, in the tradition of the United Church, to continue to create the context for the Risen Christ to appear and be recognized and witnessed to, here on the West Side of Vancouver.

Is it really that important? I think it is. For I am convinced that the United Church of Canada has a particular and distinctive articulation of the good news of God that the world desperately needs to hear, the good news of God's love and acceptance of all people, no matter their gender or sexual orientation, cultural background or social class.

Is it possible that even in our lamenting about the past that no longer is, even in our uncertainty about what the future holds for us, even in our searching for signs of Christ's risen life within us and among us, is it possible that even here, the Risen One appears? It was true for the earliest disciples, and it is true for us. Perhaps, like the disciples, it is only when we truly know our loss, and our need, that our eyes can be opened to the possibilities of unexpected new life rising up. May it be so for us. Amen.