

The Invisible, Almost Visible Man

An Easter 3 Sermon

Luke 24:13-35

Sunday, April 6, 2008

Dr. Frank Trotter

[Pastor's Note: This is the first in a series of four sermons on First Church's Core Values adopted by the Church Council this past January. Today's sermon is on "Spiritual Discipleship."]

I've sometimes wondered if they felt embarrassed or self-conscious in retrospect. You know who I'm talking about: those two disciples who were walking along the road to Emmaus shortly after Jesus had been raised from the dead. I've wondered because they didn't even see it coming. I know what that feels like. Don't you? (My mother always told me that I drift in and out and only pay attention when I want to.)

These two guys are walking along going over all of the tumultuous events that have been going on in Jerusalem over the past week when this stranger suddenly is walking with them. I don't mean "gradually"; I mean "suddenly."

"What are you talking about?" he asks them. Did they feel embarrassed later to know they didn't even recognize the voice that they had listened to every day for the past three years? "What are you talking about?" he asks them, and they turn to him in astonishment and great sadness. "Are you the only person on the face of the earth who can't guess what we're talking about? We're talking about the things that everybody's talking about."

"And what's that?" the invisible, almost visible Lord asks them.

They tell him, perhaps as if to a child that hasn't been listening, about Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet, who was handed over to be condemned and crucified; him whom they had hoped would be the one to redeem Israel. They tell him that just this morning (for it still is Easter Day as this story takes place), just this morning some women went to the tomb and could not find his body; instead, they encountered a vision of angels that told them he was alive. When they came and told us what they had happened, some went to the tomb and found it just as they had said; but they did not see him.

And the Risen Lord says, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have foretold.” Then he tells them the story of his ministry all over again, and indeed the events of the past week that they had just told him. But this time, the voice begins to registers; this time, the invisibility of this stranger begins to become less apparent than the visibility of this very same man. Can it be? Is it possible that this illusive companion to whom they have been telling the story of Jesus is, in fact, he?

Then, just before he vanishes again, he sits with them at a table for a meal which is a prefiguring of the Communion meal itself. Later when they are telling everyone what happened to them, they say over and over again, “But the moment when we finally knew it was him for sure was when he broke the bread with us.

Theologian William Loader says of this famous passage, “What a wonderful story! It celebrates Easter. It invites participation. It is in the best sense a faith legend. The risen Jesus appears and just as suddenly disappears. We are not in the realm of a literal understanding of resurrection which would have Jesus brought back to life (like Lazarus) and living a normal life. It is not that Jesus was hiding behind the bushes and slipped in behind and then beside these two disciples while they were walking with his face half veiled to avoid recognition. It was not that he slipped out the door later while they were not looking. Luke invites us to imagine something more mysterious: a materialising and dematerialising risen Jesus who makes appearances and then vanishes. This was consistent with how the early traditions understood Jesus’ resurrection – and ours. It is the same person, embodied, but now transformed or transfigured into a new way of being and being embodied.”¹

Dr. Alan Culpepper who is the Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, says, “God’s presence is always elusive, fleeting, dancing at the edge of our awareness and perception. If we are honest, we must confess that it is never constant, steady, or predictable. The nuns in *The Sound of Music* sing, ‘How do you catch a moonbeam in your hand, how do you hold a wave upon the sand?’ The mystery of transcendence is

¹ William Loader, “First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Easter 3,” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEaster3.htm>. Dr. Loader is a member of the faculty at Murdoch University, Uniting Church in Australia, in Perth.

always transitory. God's faithful perceive God's presence in fleeting moments, and then the mundane closes in again."²

Culpepper says, "For this reason, we learn to treasure religious experience in retrospect. The two in Emmaus exclaim, 'Did not our hearts burn with us?' Like Moses, we usually see only the back side of God as God passes us by (Exod 33:23). With Job we confess, 'Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him;/ he moves on, but I do not perceive him' (Job 9:11 NRSV)."³

Several weeks ago, Gary Keene, Bishop Swenson's assistant, sent me a video link entitled "Do the test."⁴ When I opened it up, I saw two teams of four persons each getting ready to play basketball. Half of them were wearing black clothing and half, white. Each team had a basketball. Then a voice said, "This is an awareness test. How many passes does the team in white make?" For about thirty seconds, you watch the two teams pass their respective basketballs around while you are frantically trying to keep count of how many times the white team members pass around their basketball. When the time is up, the narrator's voice comes on again and says, "The answer is 13." And then there's a pause before the narrator also says, "But, did you see the moon walking bear?"

As you are thinking to yourself, "What moon walking bear?", the video tape suddenly rewinds and begins playing from the beginning. And there, just about half way through, is a moon walking bear that walks into the picture from the right hand side, stops in the middle of all the action and waves to the camera, and then walks off backwards on the left. The bear is in the video for about five seconds. I was so intent on counting those 13 basketball passes that I missed it entirely the first time I watched!

In what could be a subtext for this sermon, the video clip closes with these words: "It's easy to miss something you're not looking for." The video was created by the British government to help promote safety on the road by encouraging drivers to watch out for cyclists.

² R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 482. Dr. Culpepper is Dean of The School of Theology, Mercer University, in Atlanta, Georgia.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Do the Test," <http://www.dothetest.co.uk/>.

That's what spiritual discipleship, the first of our four core values, is all about – paying attention to our relationship with Jesus Christ so that our eyes are opened and we come to know him!

We've been talking a lot in recent months about what it will take to transform our congregation – a task that every congregation needs to explore on a regular basis! You know what? It's simply not possible to have a vital church if the members are not involved on a regular basis in studying the scripture to learn more about the invisible, barely visible man, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If you haven't been in some kind of Bible study in the last two years, I'm inviting you to do so by the end of this calendar year.

It's simply not possible to sustain any kind of significant spiritual growth in a congregation if the members are not willing to be in church together as often as possible. We need you here every single Sunday to join with us as we explore our relationship with Christ. Guess what? You need to be here, too, without excuse or exception.

It's simply not reasonable to expect a congregation to suddenly remake itself into a thriving place if the members are not willing to do what it takes to get their lives in harmony with the life of the one in whose name we are called. That requires the voluntary sharing of our time, our talents, our gifts, and our service. And you know what? I believe that First Church Pasadena is coming to one of those moments, one of those corners to turn when we begin to be that kind of congregation. That's what it takes – a willing sacrifice to God of everything with which we've been blessed.

After the invisible, almost visible man disappears from their sight, the two disciples turn to each other and say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" That burning heart experience is what vital faith is all about. It's what John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist tradition, felt on the night of his conversion and would later write about in his *Journal* – "I felt my heart strangely warmed." When we are invested in spiritual discipleship, so many of our other anxieties about life seem to fall back into a manageable place. And so many of the challenges of our life as disciples of Jesus suddenly seem to be manageable.

During this past week many Americans have taken a moment to reflect on the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on

April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. As is the case with most prophetic figures, King was not fully understood or appreciated within his own time. For some he was a figure of controversy and division; for others, a sign of unity and hope that stretched across racial and socio-economic lines. When he called for a new day in America – his famous “dream” – it seemed a fantasy to some. But in the years since his death, his words seem to have grown stronger, his vision more compelling. He, too, was one of those mysterious almost visible men of God within our midst.

Garrison Keillor, in his wonderful elliptical way of talking, says, “Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have got it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted if you’d known.”⁵

Yes, it’s true: it’s easy to miss something we’re not looking for. But it’s also true that we’re much more likely to see something that we are looking for.

Moon walking bears are fun, I suppose. But, oh, the glory that we feel in the depths of our hearts when we come expecting to see the Lord Jesus Christ, and do – in the breaking of the bread and in fellowship with one another in his name.

It’s our journey with him that matters more than anything else in life. Period.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Garrison Keillor, “The Garrison Keillor Page,” <http://www.mindspring.com/~celestia/keillor/>.