

When Jesus Is Unrecognizable

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Chris Tryon]

Good morning this morning scripture reading is from Luke Chapter 24 verses 13 through 35. The title in my Bible says "The Walk to Emmaus".

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem, **14** and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. **15** While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, **16** but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. **17** And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.^[b] **18** 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?" **19** He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth,^[c] who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, **20** and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. **21** But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.^[d] Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. **22** Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, **23** 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. **24** 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." **25** Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! **26** Was it not necessary that the Messiah^[e] should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" **27** Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. **29** 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. **30** When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. **31** Then

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their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 32 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?" 33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. 34 They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" 35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you Chris. It is really nice that we've figured out some ways to use this digital tool that kind of can help us recover some of our liturgy traditions. It feels really nice to me to have some sense of normalcy in this time. And major thanks to the whole team of people who is making these services happen, or making this service happen. We have people out running the slides, people on captions, people acting as the meeting host and producer, pointing the virtual camera wherever it needs to go. I'm really grateful to all of you who are helping out this morning - and we are going to do communion later, by the way, so if you want to go grab something that's as close to bread and wine or bread and juice as you can find in your house and we'll do communion after the sermon. And we've done that remotely a few times. Now it doesn't have to be exactly right. The closest you can get will be fine so if at any point you want to just get up and go get that while I'm talking to be ready for that at the end you can go ahead and do it. But I think we've gotten just about enough practice here just in time to learn what we're doing in time for Easter, which, if you can believe it, is just 7 days away. And we'll be celebrating Easter virtually just as we've been doing worship for the past few weeks and we'll make the best of that.

And actually this Gospel story that Chris just read for us is an Easter time text. It's one of the gospel readings that is usually read on one of the Sundays after Easter Sunday and you can guess why. It's because it tells the story of some people who encounter the resurrected Jesus and in our timeline here we haven't even gotten to the crucifixion yet. We're still in the season of Lent. And now, usually we are kind of sticklers for observing Lent and not getting ahead of ourselves and we find it very helpful to remember to observe the the confusion and and pain that can come during the season. And so we try to we try not to get ahead of ourselves during Lent most years. But I think this year is practically begging for an exception to that rule. Not to mention that most days most of us don't even know what day of the week it is, let alone what season in the church calendar we're on. So this sermon topic, this story and what I wanted to

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say about it was planned out months ago. Long before we knew just what we would be facing as a society and long before we knew that we wouldn't be able to worship in person during Lent. This story was chosen because it was a good fit with our Deconstruction Project series which you may remember started on March 1st... 30 years ago. It turns out to have been a remarkably fitting start date because if there was ever a month to talk about disorientation and pain and doubt and strife, March 2020 is that month. But as has been the case pretty much all through the series, I think that today's story has plenty to offer us for the time that we're in. And that is true probably whether or not any one of us might have said that we're experiencing something called "deconstruction," because this is a story about some people who found themselves very suddenly in a new situation. A situation that challenged their whole understanding of the world. And so when I planned the sermon, you know, 8 or 10 weeks ago, I assumed at that time that the pain that you some of us might be feeling would be about the tectonic shifts in our belief, in understanding, that that can be unsettling.

But now of course we have a different reason to feel emotional, or a different reason to doubt. A different reason to be sad or worried or in despair or even angry at God. I mean the thoughts of loss of life, of burial, of darkness that are all present in this story... they're a little too close to home for us at the moment for all of us. So all the more reason, I think, to go ahead with the plan and to ponder this particular story and allow it to speak to us. So I want to think together about where these disciples are and where they are not. What they are experiencing, what they're not experiencing. I think that would be helpful and possibly reassuring to think about their story just for a minute in that way. They *are* in a place of sadness and lament and loss.

Here's when they say to Jesus, talking about Jesus but they don't know it yet, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Now I think it's really interesting that they're feeling this way - they're feeling sadness and loss - even though they're not in that space between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Right? I mean everybody would understand them feeling this sense of loss on Saturday after Jesus was in the tomb but before he was raised from the dead. But they're feeling it after the resurrection has been proclaimed to them. They just don't believe it yet because they haven't seen the evidence, and possibly also because they just don't want to believe women - which yes was already a problem back then. So they are in a place of doubt and deconstruction, but they are not in a place of total unbelief or rejection of Jesus. You know, even in this place of of doubt and despair they say "We were talking about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." You see, they still hold Jesus in a very high regard, they're just not sure that everything that they had hoped was true about him was actually true about him. And they just... they don't quite recognize him. In short, their story, I think, can't be neatly categorized in any standard way. You can't say about them they have this belief or they don't have this belief. I think they're very

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confused. They're sad. They're clinging to a hope but it's a faded hope. They're faithful in their doubt and they are doubting their faith. They know where they're going, but they're not quite sure why. And I bet that that describes a lot of you. And what I'd like to do is, I'd like to talk about three things that I think make this story remarkable.

Three things, and they're quick thoughts, that I think make this story worth considering. The three things are this: First I want to talk about an act of faithfulness that they were still able to muster. Secondly I want to talk about how that act unlocked a new connection with Jesus, and then thirdly I want to talk about how that connection with Jesus was immediately tested again. Alright. And again this will be fairly quick.

Here's their act of faithfulness. Their act of faithfulness is that even in the midst of their disorientation and doubt and despair, they still practice the spiritual discipline of hospitality. And yes, that is a spiritual discipline. What they do is they invite him in to stay for the night, instead of letting him walk on alone. This is definitely an important action in the ancient world and it was definitely a part of how people saw themselves as being part of God's care and protection for others. And I think that that's worth remarking on, because in their distressed state they might easily have decided to take a pass on that. To say, "Well, we are supposed to be hospitable people but we've been through a lot. We're really hurting right now and we don't, we just don't have much to give, so somebody else is going to have to take care of this person this time." But they didn't say that, they invited him in. They were faithful in the midst of their faith crisis. As faithful as they could be. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is how that act of faithfulness led them to the moment where they finally did recognize Jesus for who he was. Where they suddenly had a new and deeper connection with God. Did you notice, in the story, what it was that made them see Jesus for who he was? It's there in verse 30: "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." Now, as a pastor I find this both very moving and also very amusing. Because you know what, Jesus had basically preached an entire sermon to them on the road while they were walking about who He was. He had taught them an entirely new way to read their Bible, taking it from Moses and all the prophets and explaining what was going on in their world, and guess what they still didn't get it. So I guess I'm just thinking if I ever feel down about the fact that my sermons aren't setting the whole world on fire I should just remember this: Jesus Himself couldn't get through to these disciples with a sermon. And I find I take some comfort in that fact. When did they finally recognize him? It wasn't until he broke the bread. Verse 35: "He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread". Wow. So you want to know why we take communion every week at Artisan? It's because communion is a holy miracle that surpasses everything else I could

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possibly offer to you. And it was because they had invited him in for a meal that they were able to have this realisation. So their small act of faithfulness - and maybe it was all they could do that night - opened the door literally and figuratively for Jesus to make himself known to them in a new way. So I wonder what small act of faithfulness you could engage in that might open the door for Jesus to reveal Himself to you in a new way?

But then the third thing is this: just as quickly as they recognized him he disappeared. Like in the same sentence in the Bible. They recognize him, and he vanishes from sight. But how is that possible? That must have been so unsatisfying, so frustrating for them. They spent days lamenting and mourning the loss of Jesus and then they spent a few short hours pondering things with this new person they didn't recognize, and then they spent one second knowing it to be Jesus before he disappeared again. And I think that more often than not that is the experience that we can expect with God. We get a little bit of understanding, and then we get more confusion, and then we get a little bit of clarity about that new confusion but it's just enough to give us a boost up to the next point of confusion. And then maybe we come finally to accept that a perfect answer isn't what we should be looking for in the first place. But just about the moment that we come to terms with that, we experience a tragedy or a loss and whatever meager container we had cobbled together to hold our God gets shattered and everything spills out onto the floor again. And I know that this probably isn't super reassuring. I know that you're probably hoping for something that feels a lot more solid today. Something that might be much more permanent. The bad news is that I just don't think that's how it works.

But the good news is that God is still faithful and that you can still be faithful too. See, notice the title of my sermon is "When Jesus is Unrecognizable," *not* when Jesus is absent. Jesus seemed absent to those disciples on the road, but he wasn't. It's just that they weren't able to recognize him and those disciples needed to learn to embrace a different vision of who Jesus was. In this season of unrest and fear. In this time of deconstruction or disorientation it may be that we also need to learn to embrace a different vision of Jesus. And so I want to say to you: may your faithfulness - whatever it is that you can muster - may your faithfulness lead to Jesus being revealed to you when you least expect it. And may the short glimpse you may get of Jesus carry you through until the next revelation, and the next and the next. Amen.

Well there's possibly no greater text in the bible to use as a communion meditation than this story from Luke's Gospel about disciples on the road. Henry Nouwen wrote a whole book about this called "With Burning Hearts." Remember they said "Were not our hearts burning within us as we walked with him on the road?" And it's a whole meditation on the life of communion, the Eucharistic life, which is just a life of sacramental thanksgiving. And so I hope that you were

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able to find some communion elements in your house. If not you can go and get them now. A piece of bread, a cup of juice. Pancakes that you have still left over from breakfast, whatever it might be. I want you to take whatever you have and imagine that it's set out on the table. Can you picture the communion table at Artisan? I know it's not the same table in your house, but I want to give you this invitation. This is the table, not of the church, but of the Lord. It is to be made ready for those who love him and who want to love him more. So come. You who have much faith and you who have little. You who have been here often, and you who have not been for a long time. You who have tried to follow, and you who have failed. Come not because it is I who invite you, it is our Lord. It is His will that those who want him should meet him here. And so you can take your bread and remember Jesus broke bread with His disciples and this is an act of remembrance of his body which is broken for you. Take it and eat it in remembrance of him. And you can take your cup. And remember that Jesus gave this cup to his disciples and that he offers it to you. And that the cup is the symbol of Christ's blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. And as often as you drink you can be reminded of Christ's love for you and for the whole world. May that be the real presence of Jesus in your house wherever you are today. May be an act of communion with each other and with God. And may it be sustenance for your hungry souls and your weary spirits.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at ArtisanChurch.com.