

TOUCH AND SEE

Our reading from Luke's gospel follows on the heels of the story about the two travelers on their way to Emmaus who invited a stranger to join them for dinner. At the table, as this stranger took bread, blessed it, and broke it, Luke says that their eyes were opened and they recognized that it was the risen Christ just before he vanished from their sight. Immediately they rushed back to Jerusalem to report this encounter to the other disciples.

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Luke 24: 36-48

Does this ever happen to you? You're at a party or some other social gathering, and someone walks up and starts talking to you, and you immediately recognize their face, but you can't for the life of you think of their name? It may even be someone you've known for a long time, and so you are too embarrassed to ask, "Now, remind me; who are you?"

But if you're like me, about ten minutes after the conversation has ended and the person has moved on, you finally, and suddenly, remember who it is you've been talking to. Maybe it is nothing more than a temporary brain freeze, or what is sometimes called a "senior moment," but it begs the question, how do you *know* someone, really know them? And does knowing someone go deeper than just recognizing their face in a crowd or putting a name to their face?

In a book called *The Alphabet of Grace*, Frederick Buechner suggests that we know people not only by what they look like or what they are named, but even more by what they do. And we may even know ourselves best in the same way. He writes, "If you want to know who you are, if you are more than academically interested in that particular mystery, you could do a lot worse than look to your feet for an answer." He says, "When you wake up in the morning, called by God to be a self again, if you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are." (*The Alphabet of Grace*, 24-25) Maybe you can say the same thing about your hands as well your feet.

As I mentioned, the reading from Luke's gospel is the second of two stories about appearances of Jesus after his resurrection. And in both of these stories—the one about walking along with two guys on the way to Emmaus and the one we read today—in both stories people don't recognize Jesus right away just from seeing him. In the Emmaus story it is in his action of blessing and breaking bread that their eyes were opened and they recognized

him, just as he vanishes from their sight. But in the sequel to that story, even as the disciples are talking about the Emmaus story, they don't at first recognize Jesus as he stands among them and speaks words of peace. Or rather, they're not sure if it really is him or a ghost or just some figment of their imagination.

And, like the Emmaus story, it's not his facial features that finally give him away. He tells them to look at his feet and his hands. They recognize and come closer to really knowing who Jesus is and what the life and death and resurrection of Jesus is all about not just when they see him, but even more when they touch his wounded hands and feet. In a way that goes beyond eyesight, they know that it is really him.

There is something about physical, material things that can open up the eyes of recognition and understanding—or memory. If you were to see this cup on a shelf or a counter somewhere, you would probably not pay it much attention. Or if you did, you might think it belongs in a rummage sale or used merchandise shop. But when I see it, it takes me back some 25 years ago to my mother-in-law's kitchen in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This was a cup that hung on a mug tree on her kitchen counter. It is the cup I always used for coffee when we visited. I still use it occasionally, but it has more than a utilitarian purpose of holding coffee. It brings back to mind mornings in Ernie's kitchen: coffee and a bagel with cream cheese, and especially that loving and lovely lady, who seemed to be always in motion, always padding back and forth between kitchen and table, and in her New York accent asking, "Paul, do you want another bagel?" after she has already toasted it and slid it onto my plate. Where her feet took her, that was who she was. And that person, that kitchen, that experience all becomes real and present to me again just by holding this completely un-remarkable cup.

When Jesus appears to the startled and frightened disciples, he is present in a real body, with hands and feet that still carry the wounds of his suffering love. And then he surprises everyone by interrupting his show and tell presentation and asking them if they have anything to eat. Not only is this a real body, it still has real hunger and needs real food. This is not just a vision; this is not some kind of spirit-being. Luke wants us to see that Jesus keeps resurrection faith tethered to the real, material, corporeal world. Resurrection faith is not just about some other-worldly, spiritual realm we are just waiting around to enter; it is also about this world where there is hunger of all kinds, physical hunger as well as spiritual and emotional hunger, hunger for community, hunger for justice and for well-being.

At the conclusion of this incredible story Jesus sends the disciples out into this real world with all its messiness and hungers. And the message they are to bring is one of repentance and forgiveness. Of all the things Jesus could have chosen as the subject of their witness, he chooses repentance and forgiveness—not church membership, not intimate knowledge of theological doctrines, not even a moral code to enforce. Just simply a message of forgiveness. A message that says that whatever is broken can be mended again. Whoever is hungry in whatever way they are hungry, can be fed and nourished. Whatever is alienated can be reconciled. Whatever is wounded can be healed. What has gone wrong can be put right. And all of this has to do with the real, physical, material world we live in day after day. The world where children still go to bed hungry; where mothers still grieve the killing of their sons; where whole communities are undermined by opioid addiction.

There is no doubt about it. The Easter story is just as hard for us to grasp as it was for those first disciples—this incredible story of a person who has crossed over the boundary that separates life and death, and, in ways we are still trying to come to grips with, is somehow present on this side of that ultimate divide.

But however we may understand, or not understand, this mystery of new life emerging from death, the most important part of the story may be how Jesus makes the connection between these two worlds—how he insists that what happens on this side of the line is just as important as what happens beyond that line. And that whatever else resurrection is about, it has to do with real bodies that still carry real wounds; it has to do with real hunger, real food. It has to do with the places our feet take us, into the real world of hunger and exploitation and gun violence and unfair housing policies that keep whole segments of the population in a cycle of poverty.

When Jesus tells those startled and frightened disciples to “touch and see” his wounded hands and feet, he shows them, and he shows us, the signs of a suffering love that continue to be present in this world. And he reminds us that whenever, wherever and in whatever way we hear someone ask, “Do you have any food?” it opens up the possibility that we still touch and see the risen Christ.

May it be so.

Paul Collier
First Presbyterian Church
Mason City, Iowa

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