

Scriptures for Skeptics: We were hoping...

“God is in charge, not me.” This is so counter to our I-culture!

“Plant the seed, take care of the plant, but the blooms—those are up to God.”

And in the nurturing, the figuring out our plantings and our very lives, we often fail to recognize Jesus. We started this line of thinking before Easter when we discussed the blind man and how many religious people failed to see Jesus for who He really was.

Today we see more of the same, but certainly more understandable, given that he had been executed publicly the week before. Two disciples, one named Cleopas and the other unnamed, perhaps his wife - were on their way home. It had been a long and horrible week of roller-coaster emotions. First, the crowds had given Jesus of Nazareth a hero's welcome, treating him like the celebrity he was, and later those same crowds yelling, “Crucify him!”

These two disciples, on the road to Emmaus were distraught, grief-stricken, having lost all hope in a drama everyone was talking

about. And the One they had believed in had turned out to be just another earthly rabbi in search of fame. The Romans had taken care of him in the same fashion that they always took care of insurrectionists: naked crucifixion. Suddenly, another person walking along the same road walking, caught up to them and asked the most absurd question ever: "**What are you talking about as you walk, and are sad?**" (v. 17). This stopped them in their tracks.

Cleopas said: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things which have happened there in these days?" (v. 18).

What irony Luke is using here! Here were two people asking the stranger if he was the only one who hadn't heard about the horrific events of the week when, in reality, He was the **ONLY** one who truly understood the events. He continues to play ignorant, perhaps putting on a bit of a foreign accent and keeping his cloak well over his face, Monty-Python-style. Perhaps there was also a wind, we are not told if it was raining, or windy, but for some reason, Jesus was not easily recognized. Not until, within the intimacy of their home, he broke the bread in his unique way, that they saw their

Rabbi and recognized him. And then it all made sense. He had given them insights over those miles of walking they had never considered, using all scripture they were familiar with. He enlightened them beyond anything they had ever imagined. What happened next? They took off all eight miles back to Jerusalem, back to the eleven holed up in a locked room. “We have seen the Lord!” they declare, a statement that will change the course of their lives.

These disciples, as well as the their cohorts back in Jerusalem, had a history of not understanding what all was going on. We seem to think it would have been easy for them to understand with Jesus there in person, with skin on---but I think it’s like not seeing the forest for the trees. How many times in the midst of our living are we blind to what is actually going on right in front of us. (And we have the entire New Testament to help us see the forest!)

The same could be said for the two disciples in question in today’s scripture. They were, no doubt, running on emotional empty. Their spiritual tanks had been overflowing, but when their specific hopes

had been dashed on the crude Roman cross, what more was their to hope for?

So what do we see from this side of the cross from this story?

Well, first, I think it is significant to think that Christ walked **with them** after his resurrection, first in a heavenly body that looked he had on earth, but not quite, and then in Spirit, as he does with us today. We see the resurrected Christ in events, in circumstances, in Presence, and in miracles unexplainable except through His power. His powerful presence in our lives is a deep and lasting comfort, shifting the burden of results from us onto Him. “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

I also think it is significant that Christ broke bread with not one, but two believers: community—that is why we come together, to remember and be formed in the breaking of bread together, in hugs and touch, in sight and sound and singing. Community.

The other important piece to this story is the discernment of truth in the Holy Scriptures. How do we discern truth? How do we use the Word of God and how do we receive messages from God? Does our reading scripture and understanding always depend on others' opinions and interpretations? Is Jesus happy with how you interpret scriptures or would he, like he did with the Emmaus-bound disciples, call your heart "slow" and your understanding "foolish"? When Jesus stands among us in His risen power, there is no doubt! Unfortunately, we have our tests that the message must pass, the screens and filters we have enforced so as not to be surprised or fooled. Unfortunately, the scriptures are NOT easy, just as life is not easy. Anyone that says that it is lacks both intelligence and compassion. But the good news is, our God is faithful. We have access to the same Spirit of Wisdom the walked with Cleopas and companion through prayer.

There are three ways I see that we sometimes **fail** to discern the message of God

First, we often fail to recognize or trust the messenger. Women are a case in point, at least in this story of the Resurrection. They were seen as inferior, bearer of idle talk. Like the blind man Jesus had healed earlier, they had to wear mud for several centuries before people realized that they, too, could see. The Marys who had run to preach the gospel after that morning at the empty tomb were not believed. After all, they were women. Have you ever failed to see Jesus or hear the gospel because of the messenger? After all, they're Republicans, or gay, or (you fill in the blank). Jesus is all about opening our eyes to see. To see is to understand that God does not inflict us with health problems because of our sins. To see is to cease using denial as a way of ignoring what is real. To see means to live in grace instead of rules that keep us in the dark. To see is to have the courage to support people who stand up for what they believe. To see is to experience the acceptance of God which is greater than the rejection of others.

Secondly, we sometimes fail to recognize God through strangers. Because the messenger is a foreigner—someone we

have been conditioned to mistrust—perhaps he wears a turban or she wears a burka- her message is suspect. Or perhaps they have a foreign accent. We are suspicious of non-citizens or people of a different American culture than our own. We all have a certain amount of stranger anxiety. Some would label this ethnocentrism- the fear of something different, usually race, gender, or nationality. Jesus is, indeed, strange-sounding to these two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He sounds well, “strange”. Hillary Scarcella says that “Racism is a destructive system I am constantly trying to weed out of my faith.” Bravo, Hillary, we need more vigilant disciples who are not afraid of weed-whacking the three most dangerous and invasive weeds of our time: racism, sexism, and patriarchy. I have told the story of our Swiss community in the 1970’s and how when my Scotch-Presbyterian tenor boyfriend was scheduled to sing in one of the Kidron churches, he was listed as Hank Rostetter. Or the time when one of my relatives tried out a Mennonite church and was asked by a well-meaning, but ignorant parishioner after the service, “Should we KNOW you?” with a

parochial meaning? We have stranger anxiety and so we try to connect somehow. It's not necessarily a sinful thing...unless it veils the message we are to learn- **that God often surprises and usually Jesus IS strange.**

Isaac Villegas, blogger for Mennonite Church USA, sitesChad

Martin, in a sermon reprinted in the Mennonite:

Easter is a time and place when and where the boundaries between heaven and earth open up. Easter is a thin place. Life and death are bound up in the same miraculous moment. The familiar and the strange show up in the same body. The Christ of eternity walks around, looks no better than a gardener and bears the scars of brutal suffering. In him, there is no distinction between divinity and humanity.

God shows up in the stranger and in the familiar.

Thirdly, we fail to recognize the Messiah in our **scripture interpretation**. We think we can recognize Jesus through the scriptures, and we DO, but when we cherry-pick, taking verses out of context to fit our opinions instead of discerning the historical and cultural context, we see the scriptures and Jesus through them, but like the disciples, we fail to **understand** them correctly! This is a wide sin in the church today—taking our worldview and imposing it onto the scriptures to make our lifestyle, our opinions

acceptable. One example of this is Jeremiah 29:11. “For I know the plans I have made for you, plans to prosper..” yes, but this was made to the nation of Israel, it is not for individual American dream success of the individual.”

Jesus invites intimacy and community in discerning scriptural interpretation, in recognizing Him, the way, the life, the Truth.. In their intimacy, the disciples finally recognize him, but only after still doubting! “He must be a ghost! Still a threat to their safety, they are afraid to acknowledge Christ as their risen Lord.

So we’ve heard that we sometimes fail to recognize Christ in the messenger, in the stranger, and in the scriptures, but how is it that we **can** make Christ visible, so that everyone connected to us knows we are part and parcel of the Kingdom of Jesus? I believe we make this kingdom known in the breaking of the bread together, both literally in the eucharist, remembering and memorializing Christ. Our welcoming the stranger is another way and our loving the earth and all people in it the third.

We live in a world that has largely rejected Scripture as a way to growth. Have you? Do you include it in your daily routine? And if you do, do you pray for specific edification through God's Spirit? On your road home, how have you walked with Jesus this week? What scripture has he given to YOU as encouragement, as a challenge? And, who have you shared "I have seen the Lord" with?