

## IN PLAIN SIGHT

*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.*

(Luke 24:13-31, NRSV)

Somebody needs to call Stephen Hawking, because there's some kind of black hole operating in my house. At least that's the story I'm sticking with. Things keep disappearing and then reappearing in plain sight. I'm not talking about the socks that disappear in your clothes dryer (everybody knows that the sock fairies take those). I'm talking about car keys, TV remotes, cordless phones and even my eyeglasses. It seems like I'm losing them all the time.

I look under the sofa cushions, behind furniture and interrogate my wife, my two year-old and my dogs, but whatever it is I'm looking for cannot be found. At least not until I get all hot and bothered after searching for a half an hour. Then the intergalactic phenomenon of quantum physics spits it out from wherever it went to and the missing item can always be found lying in plain sight at a location I have already looked at and walked past multiple times. It could be that the missing item was there all along and I didn't see it, but I think I'll stick with the black hole theory.

Sometimes when things are in plain sight, one needs more than *plain sight* to see them.

In today's scripture passage, we find both an example of something hidden in plain sight and an example of when plain sight or ordinary vision proves insufficient to find it. It is the original Easter Sunday and two people, possibly

husband and wife,<sup>1</sup> are walking down a road to a suburb of Jerusalem called Emmaus. Although not part of the original twelve disciples, the two are part of the group of people who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry. A man joins them on their journey and the dramatic irony ensues.

We the readers are told that it is in fact Jesus himself who has joined them. If we were reading the Gospel straight through, we would already know that in the previous chapter Jesus has risen from the dead. We know, but Cleopas and his companion do not. It's worth asking, why not, after all they knew Jesus before he died. The passage says, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." The English translation of the Greek here is correct. It is a passive verb, which means—as your grammar teacher taught you—the subject, rather than doing the action, is acted upon. What kept their eyes closed to the resurrected Jesus who stood before them? We are left only to presume the cause of their eye condition.

The awkward comedy of the situation grows as one of the travelers, Cleopas, starts to lecture Jesus on his ignorance. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" *Embarrassing!* Cleopas has gone and done it now—treating Jesus, of all people, as if he didn't know what happened to him! It gets worse. Cleopas then starts lecturing to Jesus about who and what Jesus did. *Awkward!* Somebody shut this guy up!

Jesus finally ends the tension and rebukes them as "foolish" and "slow of heart." At least they ask him to stay with them when it is time for rest and they share their meal. Suddenly, as Jesus breaks the bread and blesses it, they recognize him. They *see* Jesus. Why did they recognize him only now? Did they remember Jesus breaking bread at the Last Supper or breaking bread to feed the multitudes of hungry people or at

one of any number of meals they could have shared with him? The scripture reads, “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him...” Again, there is a passive verb. Something opened their eyes. What was it? Or maybe we should ask *who* was it and *when* was it?

Jesus opened their eyes and their eyes were opened at the Lord’s table. Although the two invited Jesus to their table to share a meal, it was Jesus who played the part of the host by blessing the meal, breaking the bread and sharing it with them. They did not know it but they were sitting at Jesus’ table.

Recently, I found myself sitting at my kitchen table with my wife, Jennifer, and son, Julian. Such is a rare occurrence at our house. Like many families, our schedules do not coincide as often as they should for us to sit down together for a meal. Yet, this night we were together. In the middle of it, Julian turned to us and said what I took to be, “Let’s play.” I assumed that he was finished and ready to get up and go play, but thankfully my wife was also present and she heard him correctly. Julian actually said, “Let’s *pray*.” Prayer together as a family is unfortunately another event that is rare in my house. So, we stopped eating and put our hands together and closed our eyes and thanked God for our food and for each other. I peeked at my son and saw his precious little hands together in front of his face and his eyes closed in concentration. Then I saw him sneak a piece of food into his mouth. At that moment, in the midst of the humor and the beauty, I realized that I was not at my own table after all. I was at Christ’s table. In the sacredness of that time, Jesus was present at our meal too, and I almost missed him.

Regularly, we gather as a church around Christ’s table. Even though on most Sundays we do not take communion together, the table is still present right up front and in the

middle of our sanctuary. We may not all fit around this table, but Christ's table is more than just this piece of furniture. Spiritually it is big enough for all of us to gather around. As we look around at the faces of those who share this table, we have our opportunity to see Jesus. We can see Jesus in friends and family with whom we have shared much. We can see Jesus in those who are new to our church family with whom we will share much. We can see Jesus in the stranger among us whom we do not know yet. We can even see Jesus in those with whom we have a grudge against and are angry with. But if we are not careful, we will miss seeing Jesus altogether.

During our time for announcing Church Concerns in our service, we have started to say, "Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."<sup>2</sup> These words are from the ad campaign started by our denomination, The United Church of Christ. A campaign that apparently was controversial enough that some TV networks would not air its commercials. It may seem strange to us that welcoming people to church would be controversial, but we should not be surprised. After all, Jesus welcomed all kinds of people to dine with him and it got him into all kinds of trouble. Jesus' welcome is radical in its grace.

You'll notice that in our scripture passage today Jesus did not barge into the two travelers' meal. "He walked ahead as if he were going on," and the disciples had to invite him in. That invitation was necessary before eyes could be opened. In the same way, we must as a church live up to our advertising and invite all comers to the table. It's not our table anyway. It is Christ's table.

Jesus came to the travelers first, not at the dinner table but on the road in the guise of another traveler. Given the tumultuous events of the previous days and lost in their own

conversation, Cleopas and his companion could have ignored this stranger they met on the road. They could have kept walking. They could have missed him completely. All along the journeys of our lives, as we journey from table to table, we will have many opportunities to see Jesus. Jesus will stand before us in plain sight, if our sight is not plain, we may see him.

A few months ago, I went to a book signing in the city by one of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott. A big “thanks” goes out to one of our church members Nancy Nevins (also a fan of Lamott) who gave me a heads up about the event. While there, Nancy and I, along with a few hundred other people, got to hear Lamott read from her new book, entitled *Plan B*, a collection of her spiritual memoirs. (If you were at the March prayer retreat, you got to hear Rev. Susan Gibson read the same passage I’m about to read.) It’s called, “The Ham of God” and in it Lamott shares an experience similar in some ways to what happened that first Easter Sunday to those travelers on the road to Emmaus.<sup>3</sup>

Lamott finds herself on her 49<sup>th</sup> birthday depressed about her aging self and the state of the world, the war in Iraq and other issues. She writes, “These are desert days,” because she feels parched and lifeless. Even her prayers seem lifeless. She kept wanting to turn on CNN and to stare at the war coverage. A Jesuit friend of hers named Father Tom calls and she asks him for some good news. He lives out in the desert and tells her that the flowers on his cacti are blooming. This happens rarely, so you have to love them for the brief time they appear. This does little for Lamott who prefers her deserts with air conditioning and room service. She asks her friend for some message from God, and Father Tom replies that many people feel close to God when they are helping suffering people. She counters that she can’t fly to Iraq and help the people there, and Father Tom answers, “There are plenty of suffering people right here.”

After the conversation ends, she prays again and asks God to simply let her be helpful to someone in need. Instantly, she knew this prayer was different.

It was the first time that day that I felt my prayers were sent, and then received—like e-mail. I tried to cooperate with grace, which is to say, I did not turn on the TV. I asked God to help me again. The problem with God—or at any rate, one of the top five most annoying things about God is that He or She rarely answers right away.

Feeling somewhat better, she went to the market to buy herself a birthday dinner. She “flirted shamelessly” with the old people in the store and she headed to the checkout line.

When the cashier rang her up, he suddenly exclaimed, “You’ve won a ham!”

I was blindsided by the news. I had asked for help, not a ham. This was very disturbing. What on earth was I going to do with ten pounds of salty pink eraser? I rarely eat it. It makes you bloat.

Someone went to the back room to fetch her ham and Lamott waited and pretended to be excited about her winnings.

I stood waiting anxiously. I wanted to go home, so I could start caring for suffering people, or turn on CNN. I almost suggested that the checker award the ham to the next family who paid with food stamps. But for some reason, I waited. If God was giving me a ham, I’d be crazy not to receive it. Maybe it

was the ham of God, who takes away the sins  
of the world.

The ham arrived and Lamott walked dazedly out into the parking lot. She was so distracted that she crashed her cart into a slow-moving car. She offered a quick apology and then realized the driver was an old friend from her days in recovery from alcohol abuse. The woman and Lamott had both had sons at about the same time. As they talked, the woman broke into tears. She explained that she was broke and didn't even have money for gas much less to buy food for her kids. Lamott quickly handed over all the money she had. When the woman protested, Lamott explained, "It's my birthday and this is my birthday present."

Then Lamott saw the ham she won. She turned to her friend, "Do you like ham?" "We love ham!" the woman exclaimed. "We eat it almost every meal." She took the ham and settled it gently into the seat next to her as if she were going to buckle it in. They talked and cried some more before saying their goodbyes. As her friend drove away, Lamott felt like her desert had begun to bloom.

Rev. Chase Peebles  
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2005

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

O Jesus, you come to us as a stranger on our life's journey, give us the sight to see you in the laughter of the child, the tears of the grief-stricken, the smile of the friend, the outstretched hand of the hungry. Do not let us pass you by. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Ringe offers the provocative—and I think convincing—argument that this was an early missionary couple like Priscilla and Aquila (see Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19). She notes that the woman goes unnamed, “a fate suffered particularly by many women throughout history.” She also thinks it is probably that the Cleopas of Luke 24 is the same person mentioned in John 19:25 (“Clopas”—a possible change in spelling due to differences in audience and language group) with a wife named Mary. Many other scholars dispute this last point. In any case, I like Ringe’s argument because it “reveals” an early female Christian leader that has been lost to us due to many interpreters’ assumptions that the unnamed disciple would have to be male. Sharon Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 286-287.

<sup>2</sup> Visit [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com)

<sup>3</sup> I encourage everyone to read Lamott’s version of this story. I am merely summarizing what is a powerful story. It is classic Lamott—filled with self-depreciating humor, tears, deep spirituality, and most of all joy. See Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2003), 3-11.