

The Road to Amazing

Luke 24:13-21a, 25-31a
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First Presbyterian Church
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The late Sam Walton, the billionaire founder of Walmart, did something pretty amazing for a group of Walmart truck drivers all traveling the same stretch of road one day. Walton happened to be flying over the highway in a helicopter when he noticed the convoy of trucks below.

Longing to make a connection with them, Walton called in a favor from a friend who was high up in the Arkansas State Police. He had the pilot call his police buddy on the radio and ask if an officer could flag down the lead truck. A few minutes later, a trooper pulled the truck over. All the others stopped as well.

“Is there a problem, officer?” asked the driver. “No,” said the officer. “Everything’s fine. Mr. Walton wants to talk with you.” At that moment, the helicopter landed by the side of the road and Sam Walton got out. He climbed into the cab of the truck and had the driver lead the convoy to the next truck stop. There, he treated them all to a friendly cup of coffee.

For years after, the truckers circulated that story throughout the Walmart fleet, telling how their CEO dropped from the sky for a cup of coffee and some conversation.

Jesus, in Our New Testament lesson for today, comes alongside two of his crew – his disciples – traveling an isolated stretch of road. And to this day, the faithful circulate that story throughout the world, telling how the Risen Lord came alongside his disciples unexpectedly, and gathered with them for an amazing conversation, and a meal.

The problem was that, unlike the truck drivers with Sam Walton, the disciples didn’t recognize Jesus when they met him out in the world. Luke tells us that when Jesus joined them on their journey, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Why is that? Why couldn’t the disciples recognize Jesus, Jesus whom they’d been following and traveling with for years now?

Luke doesn’t come right out and tell us, but it’s pretty clear they were focused on the wrong things, focused on the past rather than the future Jesus envisions for them, and for us. We see this when Jesus asks them what they’re talking about and they reply, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”

Of course, they are talking about the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, the empty tomb and the angelic pronouncement that he has risen. At this point, no one for sure has seen the Risen Lord, except maybe Mary Magdalene. And in their despair, the disciples don’t believe her.

Isn't that our problem, too? We have this sense that Jesus is with us. Some of us feel this very strongly and others merely cling to their belief as if grasping a lifeline with their fingertips. And as we continue journeying along, it seems that more and more people just don't see it – they don't see what we see when it comes to the importance and blessing of a life of faith. And this makes us sad and worried.

We're just like the disciples who Luke says "stood still, looking sad" when they met a "stranger" who didn't seem to have any knowledge of Jesus. All their hopes and dreams for their community of faith were slowly fading from view. It's as if they were suddenly dropped into a godless place with fewer and fewer believers.

We can relate to that in this day and age. In fact, our New Life Committee on Tuesday spent an hour and half talking about how to spread the news of Jesus and share the faith with others. And this, after last month's meeting, doing pretty much the same thing.

One of the things we realized is that, not only do we have to spread the news of Jesus to people outside the church, but we have to spread the news within the church. And we probably need to start here, with ourselves, if we hope to reach people further out.

We have to develop a curiosity about what Jesus is doing here among us at church, where we added 12 people to the membership rolls in the past two years, where we baptized a baby last year and will baptize another next month, where we have a member wedding scheduled that same month,

where a dozen children are being nurtured in the faith, where we have more than half a dozen small groups gathering us together, at least four All-Church or Community meals offering food, fellowship and outreach, two huge annual events that gather and serve our neighbors in the community, thousands of dollars in missions giving, and countless ways for you to serve those needing the love and care of the Lord.

We have to develop a curiosity about this so that we all know about it, and then we have to generate some enthusiasm for sharing it with others. One of the reasons we fail to share the good news with others is

because too often too many of us are like a stranger with the disciples who "does not know the things that have taken place...."

We're too focused on the things that are not taking place, the people and programs that aren't here, the world that somehow can't see us for who we are, doesn't appreciate what we offer.

We're like the disciples with Jesus on the Road to Emmaus who don't realize they're on the Road to Amazing, amazing faith, if they just stay on the road with Jesus.

When Jesus asks them what things they're talking about, what things they're focused on, they reply, "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." And then they add something that must have broken Jesus' heart. They conclude by saying, "But we had hoped...." "... We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." They let their hopes be dashed by an indifferent world that just can't see it when Jesus is standing right in front of them.

"Oh, how foolish you are," says Jesus, "and how slow of heart to believe...." And then he shows them in scripture where faith is to be found, where Jesus is clearly seen as the embodiment and fulfillment of God's word.

Listen folks, we have good news to share, but we first have to open our eyes to what Jesus is doing here, today. And we have to be willing to go that extra mile to tell it among ourselves and all those we meet – tell about what's here, and don't worry and fret over what's not.

This is how the good news is shared, this is how Jesus becomes real for people! This, and being in community with one another, where we can be fed and nurtured in the faith, where we can offer to others and receive for ourselves care and concern, spiritual growth and blessing.

It's all about coming together at table – here or anywhere in faith – and being touched by the Lord, touched in such a way as to touch the lives of others. If you're not amazed at the things happening here at First Church – if you're not even aware of them, if you're not taking the time and making the effort to learn about them – how can we hope to touch the lives of others with the good news that Jesus has for them?

Later in Luke, when Jesus was with those two disciples at table, "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then," says Luke, "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."

Out in the world, Jesus touches their hearts – our hearts – with words of faith, amazing stories of faith worth sharing and talking about. And here at the table, he gathers us – that we might, prayerfully and deeply, see Jesus for who he is, Lord and Savior, Friend and Companion, and share that good news with all we meet. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, like your earliest disciples, we want to believe but we often doubt. As we walk alongside family or friends suffering from illness or injury, dealing with the pain of loss – loss of any kind – we aren't always confident of your presence. The shadow of gloom muddies our sight.

And still, we pray for those in need. And we are thankful. We are thankful for those who encourage us and speak your presence into our lives, who help us remember your amazing story (with and without words), who remind us that you haven't abandoned us.

Help us trust that doubt is a part of faith – and not a lack of faith. Open the eyes of our hearts so we might see you. Kindle in our hearts a desire to know you better and renew our spirits.

Help us grow in our faith and build our lives on the sure foundation of the risen Christ. Let our minds and our hearts truly take in the good news of your presence among us.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.