

SERMON: Recognizing the Risen Lord

TEXT: Luke 24:13-35

Barbara and her adult daughter Joann were leaving a restaurant one evening when Joann stopped to say hello to a man she recognized. Barbara stood and smiled, politely waiting to be introduced. Joann continued to chat with the man, but instead of introducing her mother, she tried to encourage her to keep walking. When they finally parted company with the man and headed to their vehicle, Barbara expressed her irritation. "Joann, who was that man and why didn't you introduce me to him?" Joann replied with an equal amount of frustration, "Mama, that was Daddy!"

Barbara and her husband had been divorced for about twenty years, but even so, she couldn't believe she actually didn't recognize him! After all, they were married for twenty-one years, and they had two children together. Even if his appearance had changed, wouldn't she at least have recognized his voice or his

mannerisms? I understand wanting to block someone out of your mind, but I never imagined it could be so successful!

It's also hard for us to believe that two close friends of Jesus didn't recognize him as he walked and talked with them on the road to Emmaus. I mean, how could they miss it? I guess if you think about it literally, he had been dead for three days, so his body would have begun decomposing. Still, it's not as if they hadn't seen him in twenty years. It had only been three days.

On the other hand, when you're walking beside someone, you don't really look them in the face. And you might say they were blind with grief; perhaps their eyes were swollen with tears; certainly they were overcome with emotion and overwhelmed with despair. Jesus was gone, and they would never see him again.

So they probably weren't paying much attention to what was going on around them. They were all wrapped up in themselves. They weren't really looking or listening at all.

We've all experienced dark times in our lives – times of tragedy and despair. Very often I think those are the times when we feel abandoned by God, that God is absent, that God is nowhere to be found. We might even start to think that God cares nothing about us. But, I submit to you that when God seems most absent – those are the times when God is closest to us, when Jesus is walking right beside us, and we just don't recognize him. Most of the time we're so wrapped up in ourselves that we're not really looking or listening at all.

I heard a story once about a little boy who wanted to meet God. He thought it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six pack of root beer and started his journey. When he had gone about three blocks, he

met an old woman. She was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the little boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but neither said a word. As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old woman, and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? She's got the

most beautiful smile I've ever seen!" Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face, and he asked, "Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?" She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." Before he had a chance to respond, she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected!"

God is always walking with us, or sitting with us in the park. We just need to pay more attention.

And there's another element of our gospel lesson that I never noticed before. Luke wrote, "As they came near the village to which they were going, [Jesus, whom they did not yet recognize] 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.”

The risen Jesus was going to continue down the road, until the two friends *invited* him to stay. Even though I just made the point that Jesus is always present and we just need to open our eyes to him, this part of the story adds another layer. Yes, Christ is present, but it is easier to recognize him if we make it a point to *invite* Christ into our lives. Furthermore, it emphasizes the Biblical idea from the book of Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

Of course, hospitality was of vital importance in Biblical times. But it wasn't just for entertaining family and friends. It was especially important to show hospitality to strangers. My Bible dictionary explains, “Hospitality in the ancient Near East was tightly bound up in customs and practices which all were

expected to observe....Hospitality was the process of *'receiving'* outsiders and changing them from strangers to guests." (Harper's Bible Dictionary, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier)

While we always seem to want Jesus to be present with us, and question where God is when we're feeling alone and neglected, I wonder how often we invite Christ into our lives. The sad reality is that - more and more - when a stranger comes to our door in the person of a young, black boy, we see a threat rather than an opportunity to show hospitality.

You know that famous painting of Christ at the door? If you look closely, you'll notice that the door has no knob. It has to be opened from the inside. Christ is right there, knocking and waiting, but it's up to us to open the door and invite him in.

Listen to an excerpt from the book, *A Gentle Thunder*,

written by pastor and author Max Lucado.

*Once there was a man whose life was one of misery. The days were cloudy, and the nights were long.... He decided to ask his minister what was wrong. "Am I unhappy for some sin I have committed?"*

*"Yes," the wise pastor replied. "You have sinned... the sin of ignorance. One of your neighbors is the Messiah in disguise, and you have not seen him." The old man left the office stunned. "The Messiah is one of my neighbors?" He began to think who it might be. Tom, the butcher? No, he's too lazy. Mary, my cousin down the street? No, too much pride. Aaron the paperboy? No, too indulgent.... Every person he knew had defects. But one was the Messiah. He began to look for him.*

*He began to notice things he hadn't seen. The grocer often carried sacks to the cars of older ladies. Maybe he is the Messiah. The officer at the corner always had a smile for the kids. And the young couple who'd moved next door. How kind they are.... Maybe one of them....*

*With time, his outlook began to change.... His eye took on a friendly sparkle.... When anyone asked for help, he responded; this might be the Messiah needing assistance. The change of attitude was so significant that someone asked him why he was so happy.... He answered, "All I know is that things changed when I started looking for God." (A Gentle Thunder, by Max Lucado, 1995. Word Publishing, Nashville, TN)*



The risen Jesus is present. Walking beside us like a best friend, listening to our troubles. May we open our eyes and expect to see him. May we open the door to our hearts and invite him in. May we welcome the stranger as we would welcome him. May we keep our focus on RECOGNIZING THE RISEN LORD... to the glory of God!

AMEN.