

“When Jesus is a Stranger”

Luke 24:13-35

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One of the most common phrases that we are hearing these days is “when things get back to normal.”

When COVID-19 is no longer a threat,  
when students can safely return to school,  
when sports stadiums can handle 50,000 fans again...

We may not know exactly when this will happen.

But there’s something in most of us that longs for that day to come again, and to come as soon as possible.

The day when things get back to normal.

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All of which makes me wonder—what is normal supposed to look like?

As followers of the risen Christ, who understand the world through the lens of God’s redeeming resurrection love, what does normal mean?

Does it look like the life we had before COVID-19 came along?  
Is God calling us to imagine something else?

Please don’t misunderstand, I do not mean that God is the CAUSE of coronavirus. I’ve heard some of that in recent weeks, Christians who claim that God has sent this virus to wreck havoc around the world and get the world’s attention.

That's hogwash.

God does not WILL the suffering and death of so many thousands of people through something as cruel as a very contagious and deadly disease.

My question is not whether God WANTED this to happen.  
Surely not.

My question is how do we, as EASTER people, imagine—or re-imagine—our relationship with God, with our neighbors, with one another...as we go through all this,  
as we keep wishing for a return to normal?

I ask these questions because of our text.

Two disciples on Easter day are headed from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus, when a stranger appears next to them.

He walks with them.

He talks with them.

This stranger is Jesus.

And yet, Luke says, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

This is, I think, is our first clue that Easter does not just mean “getting back to normal”...

Disciples who are with Jesus, but don't know it's Jesus?!!

Easter means something new, something unfamiliar.

Easter means that Jesus could also come to US—  
in appearances we do not recognize—  
in ways we have not planned—

in something other than what's  
NORMAL.

Have you thought at all about what NORMAL means to you?

You may have heard about the experiment that took place a number of years ago now. When *The Washington Post* got together with the world-renowned violinist Joshua Bell...and on a normal, everyday Friday morning in January, the *Post* put Joshua Bell at a subway stop in the Washington Metro during rush hour.

Joshua Bell played 6 classical pieces for a total of 43 minutes.

The *Post* videoed the event....

- 27 people gave money, most of them on the run;
- 7 people stopped what they were doing  
to spend at least a minute listening;
- 1 person recognized Bell;
- and 1,070 people walked right by!

Now...think about this.

Joshua Bell has played for crowned royalty.

Joshua Bell received the Avery Fisher prize as the best classical musician in America.

Tickets to see Joshua Bell perform can easily go for hundreds of dollars.

And here was a chance to hear Bell play for free, no less than 4 feet away—and over 1,000 people walked by.<sup>1</sup>

Did those people not see him?

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<sup>1</sup> “Pearls Before Breakfast,” by Gene Weingarten, in *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2007.

Sure, they saw him.

Did they not hear him?  
Of course they heard him.

But they were so caught up in their normal routine...their VISION was not what it could have been...and their HEARING was not what it should have been...

Have you done any thinking these days about what NORMAL means to you?

- Have you noticed, perhaps, a newfound appreciation for the people whom you miss seeing?
- Have you noticed the time you spend with a loved one at home, and wonder why you don't spend that time during so-called "normal" days?

While you're considering that, take another look at our text. What is it that allows those two disciples to finally recognize the risen Jesus?

Luke writes:

"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.'"

In other words, those two disciples PAID ATTENTION to this stranger. They did not ignore this stranger.

They invited him into their lives.

And it is at THAT moment—  
that Jesus is revealed to 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...”

I wonder if, during this STRANGE and UNUSUAL Easter season, if there are any ways in which God is trying to open OUR eyes, eyes that are closed in our OLD normal...

For example, the simple act of going to the grocery store during a pandemic has made me much more aware of all the trips I took to the grocery store BEFORE the pandemic.

On a “normal” day, pre-pandemic, I might complain about having to go to the grocery store... and I never really think about the people who WISH they could go to a grocery store, but find themselves at a food bank instead.

Do you think, perhaps, God wants me to change my field of vision after the pandemic is done?

You know what Joshua Bell said about his experience  
of playing the violin for people who walked right by?

“It wasn’t exactly stage fright, but” he admitted, “I was stressing a little.”

“At a music hall, I’ll get upset if someone coughs or if someone’s cell phone goes off. But here, my expectations quickly diminished. I started to appreciate any acknowledgment, even a slight glance up. I was oddly grateful when someone threw in a dollar instead of change.

“It was a strange feeling,” he said, “that people were actually, ah...”

And it was something of a struggle to say the word—

“...that people were *ignoring* me.”<sup>2</sup>

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The Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Viet Thanh Nguyen, recently wrote:

“Perhaps the sensation of imprisonment during quarantine might make us imagine what real imprisonment feels like. There are, of course, actual prisons where we have warehoused human beings who have no relief from the threat of the coronavirus. There are refugee camps and detention centers that are de facto prisons. There is the economic imprisonment of poverty...where a missing paycheck can mean homelessness, where illness without health insurance can mean death.

“Is it too much to hope that the forced isolation of many [of us]...might compel radical acts of self-reflection,  
self-assessment and...  
solidarity?”<sup>3</sup>

Have you done any thinking recently about what normal means to you?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Viet Than Nguyen, “The Ideas That Won’t Survive the Coronavirus,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2020.

Those two disciples in our text, they set out thinking that their destination was Emmaus. That was normal. That was home. Jesus was dead, and life—however sad—back to what they knew.

But AFTER Jesus appears to them,  
and Easter becomes REAL to them,  
do you recall what they do?

Luke writes:

“That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem...”

Their destination CHANGES.  
Their plans and routines...are thrown out the window!

In other words, Easter does not REINFORCE the status quo.  
It never has.

Easter changes it.  
Easter rearranges it.  
Easter is about Jesus, alive and at work right now,  
moving us to NEW DESTINATIONS...

Sure, we can't go to new places out there right now.  
But we can go to new places in here, right now.

I believe the risen Jesus IS in your heart, and my heart,  
moving us to deeper places of hope and faith and love...

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Back when we lived in Dallas, one of my colleagues in Grace Presbytery was a pastor named Princeton.

He came to the United States from Nigeria in 1976.  
On his first Sunday, he went to church.  
It was a fundamentalist Baptist church.

And when he showed up, the pastor asked him to leave.  
Princeton had no idea why.

“Mistreating others based on the color of their skin went against Nigerian values of treating strangers with great kindness, [Princeton] said, so he returned the following week for Sunday school.”

“This time they all moved away from me,” he recalled.  
“The third Sunday, the pastor showed me his gun. I didn’t go back anymore.”

But rather than quit on churches in the United States, Princeton tried again, and this time was welcomed warmly by folks at another Baptist church. Eventually, Princeton found a home in our own Presbyterian denomination, and he went on to become ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

I remember being at a committee meeting with him once.  
Princeton made a comment about his scar—if memory serves, I recall him pointing to a scar on his hand.

I had shaken his hand any number of times.  
Never noticed, never paid any attention to the scar.  
Behind that scar was Princeton’s story.

Princeton, you see, was a child soldier in Nigeria from 1967-69.

“I was...taken by the Igbo tribe as I went to get water for my mom,” he said.

“It’s hard to explain, because it doesn’t seem real, but once I got out

[in other words, once he was free from being a child soldier]

the Spirit of the Lord came upon me and asked me  
to go back to some of the families  
that we had committed atrocities against.”

“How the men and women in that village responded to him transformed his life.

**Experiencing their forgiveness, he said,  
gave him freedom to allow God to pursue him,  
and inspired him to pursue others  
with grace and love.”<sup>4</sup>**

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And Princeton’s life...was never the same.

I’ve found myself, throughout these past 6 weeks, looking forward to all these things that can happen when the pandemic is done.

Going to the Peace Center or a ballgame again.

Worshipping in person with all of you again.

Looking forward to the rhythms and routines of an uninterrupted school year again.

Normal, right?

Nothing wrong with that list.

You know what I probably need to put on my list?

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Seebeck, “God Is Writing History In Our Lives,” Presbyterian News Service, August 12, 2015, <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/8/12/god-writing-history-our-lives/>.

I probably need to put on my list that I'm looking forward to the way that the risen Jesus will show up in my life, and say, "Ben, you are an Easter person. Because you are an Easter person, it's time to change **this part** of your normal routine."

I say looking forward to it...  
that doesn't quite capture it.

You see, Jesus may show up in my life...  
and I may not recognize him at first.

He may show up, and ask me—  
or ask our church—  
to do something new for him.

To pursue someone with grace and love, someone we are not used to pursuing.

To be honest, I'm a little scared of that.  
I'm a little scared of Jesus shaking up my status quo.

But you what I'm even more scared of?

That I'll be so eager to get back to what's "normal," I won't see him. And I won't hear him. And I will be so busy, I'll walk right by.

That's why I'm glad I have you in my life.  
You'll keep me from failing to see Jesus, right?  
Through your actions, your words, your generosity, your love...

If you'll do your best to my eyes open  
to what Jesus might be up to,  
I'll do the same for you.

Amen.