

The Disappearing Jesus

Luke 24:13-35
Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese
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The children lined the doorways leading into the delegate hall on the day the 2 resolutions related to same-sex inclusion were to be discussed and voted on. As we approached the doors, they handed us these pieces of paper, with their handprints on them and the message, “We are praying for you!”

I knew this would be a difficult day, but what I hadn’t anticipated was the emotion that would hit me when I received this paper prayer, and walked through the doors into the delegate hall. I wasn’t alone in experiencing this wall of emotion. Several people I talked to said they felt like crying as soon as they entered the hall. What was clear was that this day and its discernment carried a lot of emotion for everyone, regardless of where they stood on these resolutions.

Luke 24:13-35 was the scripture text that was central to convention and the basis for the theme, “On the Way”. In this text, the disciples are trying to make sense of what had just happened. They have been in Jerusalem for the crucifixion of Jesus; they have heard that some women went to the tomb early that morning and did not find Jesus’ body there. These women had seen a vision of angels, there at the tomb, and were told that Jesus was alive, that he had risen. But no one had yet seen Jesus. They were busy talking and walking, grieving and de-briefing on the way. They were between Jerusalem and Emmaus, that space in the middle where there is sometimes confusion, and often times lots of conversation trying to understand and make sense.

Into this confusion and conversation, comes Jesus. They are kept from recognizing him, though, which gives them the opportunity to tell him all about what has happened. I think that the disciples, in telling their story again, and then in hearing from Jesus what he has to say—beginning with Moses and the prophets—are perhaps in a better position to recognize him when he breaks bread with them.

There has been a lot of conversation surrounding Kansas City! There was conversation before the delegate sessions, and there has been a lot since. We travelled after convention, and both north and south of the border, ‘what happened at Kansas City’ was a significant part of our conversation. So many people wanted to know; and I needed to talk about it to make sense of it for myself. I think many were trying to come to some understanding of what it might mean for the church. There have been many articles, blog posts and pieces written in our Mennonite periodicals since Kansas City as well—again trying to make sense of what happened.

We, collectively, are the disciples on the road to Emmaus. We live much of our lives ‘in between’; on the way; trying to make sense of our experiences, not yet knowing where we will arrive. If we are lucky, we recognize that Jesus is on the way with us. Sometimes we, like the disciples, are on our way to Emmaus, devastated by events that have happened in Jerusalem; filled with grief and confusion. The road to Emmaus is long; it takes a long time to place our experience into the timeline of history, beginning with Moses and all the prophets.

Sometimes, we are on our way back to Jerusalem, eager to tell others that “we have seen the Lord! He is indeed risen and has appeared to us!” This road does not seem as long; in our haste to share the good news, the miles fly by. In the company of those who have witnessed this good thing with us, we don’t notice the dust on our feet or the stones in our sandals.

There is a lot that happens on the way. But some significant things happen when we arrive as well. Sometimes, when we get to where we are going, we recognize Jesus, often around tables, particularly while sharing food. When the disciples and Jesus sit down to eat, when they gather around the table, “Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. In that moment, they recognize him.”

And what happens when they finally do recognize him, as he breaks the bread? He vanishes! “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.” Why is it that just when they get it, just when they see him, just when they realize he’s been with them all along; why is it that he vanishes at just that moment?! I mean, they were grieving, and now he’s here and he doesn’t even have the decency to stick around and finish the meal? What is that about?

Perhaps he understands our tendency as human beings to want to put people in their place, to keep people and things where we’ve found them. Consider all the holy sites in Israel, cathedrals built where a manger was; rocks rubbed smooth by hands that want to touch the place where Jesus was; candles lit and prayers said in the church built over the place where he died.

We want Jesus to stay where we can see him; we want to pin him down to this place, this time, so we can find him again. I think Jesus knows that. His instructions to Mary in the garden, after she recognizes him, indicate that her first inclination on seeing him is to hold him; he gently tells her not to cling to him (John 20:17). Our instinct, when we find someone, is to reach for them, to hold on to them, to keep them with us.

I think Jesus appears to the disciples, and then vanishes, so that they don’t stay in that place. He needs them to go back to Jerusalem to witness to the others. He needs them all to keep spreading the news; he needs to leave that place, so he can appear in other places, other times, amongst other people. I think it’s interesting that we don’t really know where

Emmaus is—if Jesus had stayed with them, there likely would be a church built on that spot.

So, because Jesus left, the witnesses could do what witnesses do—tell others about their experience. Because Jesus is not in one specific place anymore, the church, his body, can be in many different places. Jesus left, so we could continue his work. Jesus appears and disappears so that we aren't left staring at one place, rooted in one spot, fixated on a particular time. Jesus appears and disappears so we can also keep moving and looking and listening for where he will turn up again.

Like the uncontrollable Spirit in the scripture from last Sunday, who changes the rules and traditions, we can't control Jesus, or keep him pinned to any one time or place. He shows up; we can hope to see him, then he's off to another place.

Did Jesus appear in Kansas City in the delegate hall? Phil Kniss, a pastor in Harrisonburg, Va. said it well when he wrote in *The Mennonite*,
“Around tables we leaned in to listen carefully and attend to our brothers and sisters with whom we shared space. Authentic church happened there despite of (or even because of) our differences. We began with the assumption we all belonged at the table, we all had a legitimate voice, we all had spiritual and moral integrity, and we all sought faithfulness in our context. Those assumptions created healthy soil where seeds of hope and joy could take root.” (July 15, 2015, Opinions post)

It was around tables as we leaned in to listen to each other that Jesus appeared. His presence was certainly evident at my table. While we didn't all agree, we respected each other, trusted each other to be vulnerable and honest about what we believed, where we doubted, where we wanted to grow in our understanding. Christ's presence was evident in the prayer team which surrounded the delegate hall and whose members walked in our midst while we discerned as tables.

Phil Kniss continues his reflections:

“But when delegate work turned from tables to floor mics, the manner of being church changed dramatically. In an instant, we shifted our posture and agenda. We leaned in not to listen, but to ensure others heard our point. We moved from discerning a nuanced response to casting an up or down vote. We shifted from valuing dissent to establishing a majority position.” (ibid)

It was hard to see Jesus when we went to the large group discussion. It is hard to see Jesus in the faces of those that we've not engaged one-on-one. Jesus is most easily met and seen around the table, in the relationships that we have with each other, in the conversations where we are trying to understand more deeply. It's not that it is impossible for Jesus to show up in large groups, for I have experienced him there too. It's just more challenging to see him in the large group, particularly when discerning issues filled with emotion, tension and pain.

One of the songs that was sung in worship is called, "Beautiful Things" by Lisa and Michael Gungor. The chorus says, "You make beautiful things out of the dust. You make beautiful things out of us. You make me new, you are making me new." I find this a hopeful word to end on, because I think we, the church, are being made new. From the dust that is kicked up on the way to Emmaus or Kansas City, God is making beautiful things. We are all being made new on the way, as we watch for signs of Christ among us. May it be so.