

One of the blessings of living by the church, is that I can go back and forth between my home and church offices very easily. This means I get to see more of my family at random moments in any given day. Last week, I came back home from the office, and found Harrison and Claire playing, while Jo napped. For several minutes, I stood there, talking to Claire, as she played with him.

When I started to head back to my office, all of a sudden, Harrison looked up at me, and he said, ‘Hi Poppa, you’re home!’ I had been standing there with him for several minutes, just feet away. I was talking, and had even said, ‘Hello.’ Yet, he hadn’t seen me. Yes, that direct attempt to reach him was not noticed. Yet, when I said goodbye and kissed Claire, he saw me. It was as if I had appeared to him right then. I asked, ‘Did you just notice me here?’ He asked, ‘When did you get home?’

The story of the road to Emmaus is a very familiar one to many churchgoers. It is one of those stories used in church names – like Emmaus UMC in Smithville – and spiritual movements, like the beautiful ecumenical Walk to Emmaus, a three-day experience that inspires, challenges and equips people in faith. This is something my mother and mother-in-law were both involved in from different faith traditions. The word Emmaus for many Christians calls up a certain image, of us walking along on our path in our lives and Jesus coming up beside us, there to meet us on our way, where we are, to teach us, and reveal Himself to us personally.

Yet for many who encounter this story, it leaves them perplexed, like me with Harrison. How could my boy be just a few feet from me, hear my voice, and not know I’m there? How could he be so locked in on something to be that oblivious? In the same vein, how could these two disciples follow Jesus for years, watch Him die on the cross, hear that some thought He’d risen, and then be completely unable to recognize Him? What’s more, Cleopas may have been Jesus’s uncle! (Early church tradition said he was.) Yet, they walked and talked and still nothing. The stranger talked about Jesus and the Messiah, and still, nothing – no recognition.

The text says their eyes were “prevented from recognizing Him,” they were “holden” in the King James, “kept” in the NRSV, and “restrained” in the NKJV, to look at a few translations. But no matter what your translation, the actual Greek text doesn’t say what prevented them, what held them, what kept them, and what restrained them. So, what was it?

Because it seems so odd, I think the easy answer, is to just blame it on God – God prevented or held their eyes. Yes, this is possible, but still, the text does not say what kept or restrained them, so there are other possibilities. I personally think that to blame God here can be the easy way out – So, today, I blame Harrison. I blame my son. Now what I mean is not that my son was there, putting tape over Cleopas’s eyes. It’s that I blame my son for not seeing his father 3-feet from him the other day, and so, as I blame Harrison, I blame Cleopas for not recognizing Jesus. Like Cleopas, Harrison was preoccupied by his circumstances, but for Harrison it was joyful. He was playing with his mama. Cleopas was depressed and in grief, wallowing in disappointment. This is what the text does say: We had hoped, were hoping, had trusted, that He would redeem Israel.

Cleopas was so upset that things had not gone the way he wanted them to go, that he apparently didn’t even believe the witness of his wife, which might explain the argument Jesus walked in on if

she was the unnamed disciple walking back with him. (John's gospel says Mary of Clopas saw the angels and empty tomb, and early tradition says this is Mary, wife of Cleopas.) It seems he rejected any and all credible witnesses – He knew better that Jesus was dead. Cleopas said Jesus was a prophet who acted and spoke with great power, but, that the chief priests, Judean rulers, and Roman Empire, then overpowered Jesus – Yes, they crucified Him. The cross was where rebel movements went to die, where Rome showed everyone their failed leader had truly failed and then they strung him up as a warning to his followers.

Cleopas even tells Jesus about the women, but it's clear he doesn't believe them. He says they didn't actually "see" Jesus, so maybe all that it meant to him was that the body had been stolen. Cleopas even acknowledges that they "say" they saw the angels, but he seems to be wondering, did they? Some men – the "reliable" witnesses in that day – went to verify, but they didn't see angels. Only an empty tomb. Cleopas believes that none of them had actually seen Jesus. And so, he and this unidentified second disciple have given up. They are walking home to Emmaus.

In our reading today, it says Jesus calls them "senseless" on hearing all of this. The King James and other translations use the word "foolish" or "fools," and both are reasonable translations. The word in Greek is basically – mind less, thoughtless, unable to perceive. Cleopas and the other disciple could not perceive that it was Jesus right in front of them, because they were not in their right minds, with fear and grief. They tell Jesus everything that we today know truly points to His resurrection, but somehow, they come to the wrong conclusion.

And so, in one of my favorite moments in all of the gospel story – Jesus reveals Himself. No, not physically yet in that moment, but Jesus shows His presence in the Hebrew Scriptures, showing the disciples how all of these pieces fit into the Law, Psalms and Prophets, and how the conclusion to draw was not Jesus's defeat – but His victory. But they still didn't get it. At this point, they seem committed to not believing. Cleopas said their hearts were burning, even when they didn't believe. They lacked the humility to accept what Jesus was telling them, to see Him. They only saw what they chose to see – Jesus forever dead on that cross. They were determined that until they saw proof otherwise, Jesus's death was all they would believe.

Yet, a nagging feeling remained and chipped away at their certainty. It wouldn't allow them to just let Jesus leave them entirely. They heard what He had told them, and they wanted to see proof, see action. The text says that when Jesus started to leave, they begged Him to stay. Then, in a visible sign of God's grace, they see Jesus for who He is. Jesus blesses the bread. He breaks it and gives it to them. He serves them. Jesus acts in love toward them, connects them to Him.

It was as I started to leave and kissed Claire, that Harrison finally realized I was there. That was the moment in all of his distraction, that he recognized my presence. Friends, in our seventh Sunday online, nearing our 40th day of official quarantine, I know we are asking questions, wondering where Jesus is in all of this. We wonder how a God in heaven could allow all of this. We are unable to see the God on earth present with us in this.

There is a lot of real pain and suffering in the world made worse by this virus. People were starving to death before the economic shut down, but now, even more are at risk. The homeless wandered

streets before, but now vital help seems more distant. Many of you felt alone before isolation, but now those feelings are greater. It can be hard to see Jesus here, by our side, in this battle, but He is.

That is our takeaway from the pillar of smoke and fire in the Exodus – that God was with Israel. And that is our takeaway from Jesus, being God in our flesh, that God comes to us. In the first century, infant/child mortality, lack of healthcare and violence reigned. In other words, poverty, starvation, viruses, and Roman brutality, killed then as they do now.

That was the world into which our God entered to share in our life, our experience. It was a world very similar to our own, but much worse in many ways. But our hope doesn't come from saying – well, it was worse in the first century, so, I guess that makes all the pain I'm going through just fine.

No, our hope comes from our God's action – because God entered into a world that is broken, to live in solidarity with us, suffer death on the cross for us, and rise again for us, revealing to us a share in God's life because Jesus lived, died and resurrected. This good news calls us, makes us chosen, cleanses us to be God's temples, to receive God's love poured in by the Holy Spirit, to fix this world, by sharing that love to reveal Jesus in every act of love.

Cleopas heard the gospel explained from God's Word, directly from the Word made flesh and still, Cleopas didn't recognize the Word of God right there in his presence. No, Cleopas was still resistant to the burning that was in his heart. It was not until he saw the Word of God in action, in the breaking of bread, that he recognized Jesus – his nephew, his rabbi, his Lord, his God – right there, with him, serving him a meal on his journey. And when Jesus disappears, Cleopas runs back, to tell his friends all that he had just experienced.

I pray we remember this in the week ahead and we look for Jesus in this difficult time, not by merely trying to intellectualize what we believe, but by seeing Jesus in action. Look for Jesus in the essential workers who put themselves at risk for you and me. See Jesus in the nurses, doctors and healthcare workers saving lives. Look for Jesus in the people in your world who need you and be Jesus by helping. See Jesus in people across this globe in dire need and be Jesus by giving what you can. Look for Jesus also in the people helping you and accept their help with grace. See Jesus in the people reaching out to talk and listen to both give and receive comfort. Look for Jesus where you see love in action, big and small.

It is easy to be distracted like Cleopas and fail to see Jesus in our midst. Whatever your current situation is in life, yes, no matter what – Jesus is coming to you. Turn to Jesus, who walks alongside of you, as one in need, or one to help. Yes, Jesus comes to us by the Word – by Scripture and by our prayer – but sometimes, what we learn only causes a burning in our hearts. It's what we see that helps us to believe. The Kingdom of God is here, look for it. Reveal it.

Yes, we hear Jesus in the proclamation of the Word, by preaching, and by testimony, but we truly see Christ our anointed King when the Word is acted on, practiced, and lived. I know it is hard in difficult times to see the presence of God in and around us. We are distracted by our struggles, by pain and misery around the world. But in these times, we must look for Jesus in those who are helping, seek Jesus in those we may be able to help by our actions, and be Jesus in our lived faith and love for others. All of this allows us to have our eyes opened, and recognize Jesus for ourselves, even when things don't look right. Amen.