

**Easter 2A**  
**Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church**  
**Lakeland, FL**

**Luke 24:13-35**

**The Right Pair of Glasses**

The middle-aged man wanted to weep in frustration as the optometrist reminded him yet again that as we get older we cannot have the vision we had when we were younger. She explained, "We can correct with contacts so that you can see distances clearly and get reading glasses for you to see close work; or we can compromise to let you see some distance and some close work with just contacts and occasional glasses, but we cannot get a perfect set of contacts or glasses that will fit all situations for you. You will simply have to learn to use contacts and glasses together and adjust like everyone else at your age." "But I can't see well with these contacts!" he cried. "And I can't stand taking the glasses on and off and then leaving them at the office and losing them at home." "Buy more glasses," she said. "They're not very expensive." He replied, "That's not the point. I want to see what I want to see when I want to see it — without any of this bother of finding the right pair of glasses."

**Obstacles to seeing**

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not have the right pair of glasses to see the stranger who joined them. We should note that it wasn't completely their fault. Luke tells us that 'their eyes were kept from the one who was walking with them. Perhaps the passive voice of the sentence points to a Someone, God, who has blocked their power of recognition, their ability to see. But surely there were other things that interfered with their vision that day. The shattering grief over a triumphal entry into Jerusalem gone, just a few days later, terribly wrong could have been blinding. The strange story of an empty tomb might have been disorienting. The scattering of friends in a hasty exit out of Jerusalem could have been completely discombobulating. A combination of all of these things could have blinded even the most visionary of Jesus' followers.

So maybe we should give them a break for not recognizing on the road the unfamiliar traveler who seemed to know so little about current events in Jerusalem. And maybe we should allow them the catharsis of re-telling what they had seen and experienced so traumatically. Just speaking aloud the words of great then of disappointment and of death, might have been healing. After all, we ourselves have stood in need of opportunities to speak of our own our own heartaches, our own losses.

And yet, there is something irritating about their blindness. Since it is perfectly obvious to all the readers of Luke from the time these words were first written down that the stranger is Jesus, why couldn't these two men recognize him? They had the luxury of walking with him before he died; they had the advantage of hearing his voice, seeing his face, touching his skin in a way that no reader of Luke has ever had. But they couldn't see, they wouldn't see what was really happening. What kind of glasses were they wearing that would keep them from seeing what is plain as day to all of us?

In recent months the letters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, which were published in 2002, have gained notoriety as her doubts and questions about God have been brought to light. Many Christians have seen her struggle as evidence of the spiritual journey that so many saints have taken before her — a journey into darkness, into a blindness of the heart that ultimately leads to the pure light of God. They talk about the "dark night of the soul," a "wilderness experience" and other metaphors for the perceived absence of God, so common among devout seekers of the Holy One.

The much-published and outspoken atheist, Christopher Hitchens, however, has seen something quite different. Last fall he wrote in *Newsweek* of his own construal of Mother Teresa's doubts: "It seems, therefore, that all the things that made Mother Teresa famous — the endless hard toil, the better austerity, the ostentatious religious orthodoxy — were only part of an effort to still the misery within." The misery, claims Hitchens, is a result of her deep-seated doubt. Further, this fundamental disbelief found expression in what Hitchens describes as her extreme doctrinal excesses<sup>1</sup>. What kind of glasses is he wearing to make such charges? And who of all Mother Teresa's interpreters is wearing the right pair?

### **Encountering mystery**

Those of us who live less heroic lives than that of Mother Teresa also cannot always find the right glasses for recognizing our encounters with mystery. We talk on cell phones as we drive on busy highways. Distracted, we change lanes and do not notice the car next to us and slightly behind. We swerve back into our lane just in time — did something divine intervene or were we just lucky? We lose sight of our 5-year-old in a sudden crowd. Just at the right moment, we look to the right and see him disappearing down a shadowy hallway. Did an angel direct our attention or was it just coincidence? A family member recovers from a long illness in a way that her doctors cannot explain. Is it a miracle or the natural, albeit not yet discovered, healing of her body? We listen to our friends' reports of feeling, really feeling, the presence of God in some difficult situation, and we wonder why we can't feel such presence or know such comfort when we are hurting. Is there any pair of glasses that will help us recognize what God is doing and what God is not doing? Is there just such a pair of glasses that each of us, no matter who we are, can put on and see God right there in front of our faces?

Maybe not, thinks August Boatwright, a major character in Sue Monk Kidd's novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. August, a strong African-American woman who gives the 14-year-old white Lily shelter after she runs away from home, tells the girl that her grandmother once heard out in a barn on Christmas Eve a whole hive of bees singing the Christmas story in Luke 2. When Lily asks if it really happened, if bees really hummed gospel truth, August can only reply, "Well, yes and no." And she goes on to say, "What I mean is that the bees weren't really singing the words from Luke, but still, if you have the right kind of ears, you can listen to a hive and hear the Christmas story somewhere inside yourself. You can hear silent things on the other side of the everyday world that nobody else can." The point, for August, is that some people can hear and some people, whether they try or not, cannot hear.<sup>2</sup> Or, to say the same thing in the terms we are using today, some people, no matter what glasses they have, will never be able to see.

## Noticing

Thanks be to God, that is not what Luke thinks as he tells the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and their encounter with Jesus. Of course, Luke leaves lots of room for God's action in this story and every story he tells about Jesus. "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him," he tells us in verse 16. "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him," he tells us later in verse 31. These sentences, with their passive allusion to someone acting off-stage, signal that God's power to open eyes cannot be controlled or manipulated by human efforts. God shows us what God wills; and our job is to notice.

In that noticing is the good news about how we all have eyes to see after all. For the disciples finally recognize Jesus in the most ordinary of moments — sharing a meal that echoed all the other meals they had shared with him, including the last meal. And although Jesus vanishes in that moment of recognition, just as so often in our own lives the touch of God seems so fleeting and soft, the two disciples continue to sense his presence as they recover that burning-heart feeling in what had been happening all afternoon — sharing a journey with Jesus that echoed all the other journeys they had taken with him, including the last one to the cross.

Long walks in which the things of the heart are discussed, meals eaten in the company of good friends — these are the lenses through which God can be seen. Glimpses of the Holy One in broken bread, in broken moments of our lives — these are the ways that the glasses we need to see are shaped and fitted to our eyes, to our hearts. Our job is simply to put the glasses on, to notice, and to name what God is doing then and now and forever more.

<sup>1</sup> *Newsweek*, September 10, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (Penguin Books, 2002), 143-144.