

# Looking Is Believing

Luke 24:13-25

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It was the afternoon of that bizarre day we now call Easter. But while we spend our Easter afternoons celebrating with family and friends, eating ham and deviled eggs, and wondering if we've saved room for a slice of coconut cake, *they*—the women and the disciples, were still running back and forth to the cemetery, trying to figure out how that stone got moved and what happened to the body.

The women had gotten up early to finish the job they had started on Friday afternoon. They had wrapped the lifeless body of Jesus in linen and laid it in a rock tomb. But they wanted to wash him, to sponge away the blood and gore and smooth his tortured flesh with fragrant ointments. More than anything, they wanted to touch him, to witness with their fingertips the reality of his death.

They had watched as the nails were driven through his hands and feet, and they stood nearby through the hours of hideous suffering, gasping in disbelief as he finally sagged against the cross and breathed no more.

But by the time he was taken down and handed over to them, the sky was bleeding indigo as the light died. Sabbath had come, and there was no time for the ritual of perfume, and even less time for the sorrowing caress of good-bye.

So they returned on the third day to finish, and that's when their world slipped sideways and nearly shook them off into the void. The stone was moved and the body was missing! Two radiant beings near the tomb said he had risen, and the women hitched up their skirts and ran the news to the disciples, and Peter took out running to see if it was true. And back and forth they went, spreading the mind-boggling word, but it wasn't yet an assured word.

It was a bewildered and wondering word because the news of the empty tomb was not received as the glorious resurrection that we celebrate. The disciples didn't sing "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." They didn't shout "hallelujah" or even call the day "Easter." They weren't called Christians and they didn't go to church. They were Jews still celebrating Passover, and beyond that, they didn't know what to think or how to act. Remember, this is Luke's gospel, and the resurrection is still a rumor. No one has yet seen Jesus *alive*.

That afternoon a couple of the followers are headed out of town to Emmaus. Their hearts are broken and their heads are spinning. *They* haven't seen any angels! They are worn slap out, and it is time to get on down the road, back to their homes and families. They walk and they talk, trying to piece it all together and see what picture might appear.

And after awhile, Jesus falls in with them, apparently on his way to Emmaus, too, and he asks them what they are discussing, and they try to explain their conversation, though they are somewhat vexed by the ignorance of this stranger, *and their eyes are kept from recognizing him*. Now isn't that interesting? Their eyes are *kept from recognizing him*. What's wrong with their eyes? Don't they work right? Are their eyes swollen from crying? Is it that between their grief and confusion they never look him

in the eye? They walk and talk with him, yet they don't know his voice, or his gait, and somehow they don't notice the nail marks in his hands. Who knows? Maybe he kept his hands in his pockets. But they don't suspect that this is Jesus, so they aren't looking for proof of those wounds.

Seeing Jesus along the road is the last thing in the world that they expect, so they don't *see* him. They see a stranger, an uninformed traveler who has managed to miss the news that Jesus is dead and his body missing. Most likely they just keep looking at the dirt. It's hard to look up at all when you are bent and broken by grief.

Maybe you've been there. Maybe you've spent time in the hell of a hospital waiting room, pacing and praying until the surgeon comes out and calls your name, and you can tell by the slump of his shoulders and the way he clears his throat that the one you love is gone. And disbelief rises up like a geyser inside you and scours your eyeballs from the backside so your vision goes grey and dim, and the surgeon, who is experienced in the alternating dance of saving and losing lives, sees your eyes go blank and leads you into the much too quiet room where your loved one lies so that your hands can gather the undeniable facts that your blind eyes refuse.

People speak to you as you stumble away, but you don't hear them, and when you finally find yourself back in the emptiness of your home, you can't for the life of you think how you got there.

Their eyes are kept from recognizing him because they are so befuddled by sorrow that they can only shuffle down that Emmaus road. The voice of a fellow traveler has no power over their eyes. They answer his questions and share the puzzle of the body, but they don't look up and see the *life* in his eyes.

It's not until they all sit down to supper together that the mystery becomes a miracle. They have given this stranger the seat of honor at the table, and with it the right to bless the meal. So Jesus says the prayer, then picks up the bread and breaks it. And right there and then, their eyes are opened, and they recognize him.

Suddenly the familiarity of his voice penetrates the ringing in their ears, and the gestures of those huge, wounded hands align with gestures they have seen before—in the feeding of the five thousand, in flipping tables in the temple, in strengthening legs and straightening backs, in touching, blessing, and healing not just bodies but also souls. Their eyes opened, and they recognized him.

C.S. Lewis said that you cannot see a thing unless you know what it is. And what he meant is that of course your eyes work, but not in concert with your brain. You know you are looking at a tree when you see a tree, so your eyes see it, and your brain says "tree." But if you didn't know what a tree was, you would see something tall and green, but you wouldn't *know* it was a tree.

There have been studies of folk who were born blind and who have had surgery to correct whatever it is that keeps them from seeing. And oddly enough, when their eyes are healed, they can see, but they can't *see*. They don't know what vision is because they have no experience of it. So a tree feels hard and roundish, and the leaves might feel soft and a little bit pointy. But green is an unknown concept. And the movement of a tree in the wind, or the shifting of shadows in the sun is completely foreign. Their eyes have to be educated in the art of seeing. And sometimes they wish for blindness again, because the world is too large and disconcerting.

It's not just a question of seeing, but of knowing what is seen. When my youngest son was three, he found a permanent marker and went to town on the inside of my front

door. I found him at work just as he was applying the finishing strokes. And a stroke is what I almost had. "John!" I screamed, with my eyeballs jumping out of the sockets, "what are you doing!!!"

And he turned around with the face of an angel and said, "Mommy, it's Jesus," which of course shut me up. Later that night, my husband and I studied the picture, and while he saw a manger scene, I saw the head of a tyrannosaurus rex!

Jesus said, "when two or more are gathered in my name, I am there." So here we are, together in that blessed name, and if he told the truth, then he is here! Can you see him? Look around you. There are no photographs of Jesus, so we don't know what he really looked like. We have ideas; we have hunches based on middle-eastern features and two thousand years of painting and sculpture. We might hold a vague notion of what he sort of looked like, but we don't know for sure.

Look around again. Look for the suggestions of him. There are powerful hands here that can labor tirelessly and still hold children close and tenderly. There are hands that can wave off a tempest and take a loaf and some fish and make a meal that satisfies. They don't have nail marks, but when we gather in the name of the one whose hands are nail-scarred, don't these smooth hands here look familiar? When you see those hands—the ones beside you, blessing a meal and breaking bread, don't they look like hands you know in your heart?

I volunteer at a downtown outreach center where the work is about helping folk get a meal, get into detox, find a job, a change of clothes, and a safe place to sleep. One day a homeless couple came in with their two-year old daughter. While they went through the mountains of paperwork necessary for assistance with housing and jobs, I whisked their little girl out of their way so they could concentrate.

She was joy incarnate, and she fairly danced in my arms. We walked all over the building, up and down stairs, made coffee, drew pictures, went back around the building and down and up the stairs. Every time we looped by the water fountain, she demanded a drink, and I leaned her down and she drank and drank and drank. Then she'd try to pull my face down to the water so that I could also drink.

It started to remind me of the woman at the well and how Jesus said to her, "if you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you 'give me a drink' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." And I began to wonder who it was I was carrying around in my arms.

It wasn't until we found some blueberry muffins that I finally knew. The muffins were massive; the kind with the crusty streusel top, and we sat down at a little table together and she broke that muffin in two and took a baby bite of one half, and with her tiny, smooth brown hands, shoved the other half in my mouth. And my eyes were opened and I recognized her.

Jesus told the disciples that it would be a surprise when he came back; it could be at any time in any place. So as believers we need to be on the lookout. We need to have the table set because he might show up for dinner at any moment. And maybe we need to take a closer look at those around us, and not just the ones we already know either. Maybe we need to sight down a loaf of bread and see if he isn't already here. More than two are gathered, after all.

Perhaps it takes the bread to open our eyes. He said at the last meal that that bread was his body, broken for you, so he is here when the bread is here, and his sacrificial love is shown when the bread is torn apart and handed around and eaten.

Are our eyes *kept* from seeing him among us, like the folk at Emmaus, or is it just that we haven't *looked* between the broken halves of a loaf of bread?

According to scripture, as soon as they recognized him, he was gone; *he vanished* from their sight. Now that seems mighty peculiar considering that Jesus was so certain that he wasn't a ghost. He told the disciples to touch him, to handle him, and he even invited Thomas, the one who still doubted, to stick his fingers in the nail holes in Jesus' hands. He's real, all right. He's resurrected flesh and bone and blood.

So what happened? Did he disappear? Was there a wispy curl of smoke rising from his empty chair after he vanished? Or was there someone sitting there still, in that very chair, some hungry stranger who tagged along down the Emmaus road? For a time Jesus was sitting there eating with them as a stranger whom they didn't know. But when their eyes were opened, were they then able to see Christ in the stranger? Or did one become the other? We'll never know, and Luke doesn't bother to explain.

So we are left with this curious tale of recognition from that peculiar Easter evening. But this much seems clear—there is more to faith than meets the eye. And with or without explanation, we must do what the folk at Emmaus finally did—go and tell the others. Share the outrageous news that he is alive and he makes himself known to *you* in the breaking of the bread.

Then bake another loaf, and another and another, and bless and break them all and help those who haven't yet seen to open their eyes. It may be that some will see and others will only look. It may be that the visions that some of us see will be similar, but not the same. Maybe just like the paintings, or a whole lot like nothing you ever imagined, or maybe quite a bit like someone you already know or might meet tomorrow. Let us look together, seeking the day when everyone will see him and know him by name. In Jesus' name, let us look together, and see what we shall see!