

A Surprising Guest
Sermon 219 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 21, 2024
Luke 24:13-35

A preacher, a soap maker, and a cat groomer boarded a plane from Austin, Texas, to Raleigh, North Carolina.

One dressed in solid-colored athleisure, the other two in colorful patterned clothing, reminiscent of the young people leaving Woodstock in 1969 after 3 Days of Peace & Music.

There was a daisy clip on the end of a wire connecting it to the blue bucket hat worn by the cat groomer. Its bounce matched the whimsy of its wearer just enough to assure the pastor that the only thing this triad of Southwest Airlines passengers had in common, was the exit row they were sitting on.

It's a funny thing when surprising strangers come together. Sometimes nothing comes of it... but sometimes, something truly remarkable does.

You see, there was a sermon preached that day, one with lasting impact on its hearers. But I'd bet you couldn't guess which one of this motley trio delivered it.

You may have guessed by now that I was the preacher on the plane that day but it wasn't me who brought the sermon.

No, I was the one who brought assumptions about the pair of strangers with whom I shared that exit row.

I was the one who -returning home from the indescribable beauty of the full solar eclipse - brought a touch of a sour attitude. I was the one who just wanted to be left alone to think about my own feelings about everything that had happened the days before.

Which is how I know that if I had been on the Emmaus road all those years ago, I too would have been absolutely oblivious to the fact that resurrection was staring me in the face... Jesus was walking beside me.

II.

Today marks the third Sunday of Eastertide. It is the third Sunday in the season of Sundays that we tell the stories of the resurrection of Christ. If you thought Easter was just a day... well... we've got some work to do. Easter is a season because the mysterious reality of the resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith.

Christ is alive and is appearing to the disciples all around Judea!

Last week we read an account from John's Gospel, where Jesus appeared to the disciples in their fishing boats and served up breakfast on the shore of Galilee, calling the disciples to go and feed the world.

The week before that, with the Easter Cantata, our music proclaimed the glory of new life and resurrection!

Two weeks prior, on Easter Sunday, we read Luke's story about the women who went to the tomb on the third day to anoint Jesus' dead body with spices.

There, they were met by men in dazzling clothing - angels we assume - who informed them that Jesus was no longer there, he was risen!

The women went and told the other disciples what they had seen but the group did not believe them. Except for Peter who took off running toward the tomb to see for himself.

Today we continue with Luke's story, this time with a pair of disciples, presumably two who had been with the group that morning... the group that called the women's story an idle tale, unbelievable garbage. They're traveling the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus. And on that road, everything changes when these two have their own mysterious encounter.

III.

Whether it was a major road or not we aren't quite sure, but we do know that the distance between the cities was about seven miles; which was a full day's journey.

It had been a holiday weekend in Jerusalem, so we can imagine that there was holiday traffic on this road. Much like I-95 or I-40 on the last day of Memorial Day or Labor Day weekend. But unlike our holiday traffic jams where we patiently (or impatiently) wait it out in our own private cars, when you shared the road in the ancient world, you were walking next to someone or a group of someones.

If you have never flown Southwest Airlines, you may not be familiar with their group boarding process. Unlike the assigned seating that most major airlines employ, Southwest doesn't assign seats, they assign boarding positions.

And at Southwest gates, passengers with boarding positions numbered 1-60 line up in numerical order when their group (A, B, or C) is called up. It leaves you in a crowded line of strangers all heading in the same direction, standing between the terminal windows and the seating area at the gate.

On a normal travel day, folks travel for all kinds of reasons. But on the day I flew from Austin to Raleigh, everybody was heading home from the Great American Eclipse of 2024.

The typically quiet line that respected different moods of the different travelers was awfully chatty. The peculiar pair who would be my exit-row-mates on the flight home were standing close to me in the boarding line. Nearby there were other young adults, twenty-somethings who were dressed similarly and carried the same suspiciously small bags with them as they waited to board. *Who taught this generation to travel so lightly?*

In addition to their ability to pack lightly, this group of travelers found it impossible to keep quiet about their experience. *Did you see it? They asked everyone in line. The eclipse? That's why you were here right? Did the clouds cover it up or did they part just in time, like they did for us? Wasn't it amazing?!*

One traveler, the soap maker, went on about how his experience with not only the eclipse but with a community of folks who gathered for the whole weekend to camp outdoors, to attend musical concerts as part of the

experience, and to share in that transcendent moment (which was about 4 minutes actually), this experience has changed his life!

Changed your life, huh? Another passenger asked as they overheard the soap-maker's account. How did it change your life?

It just made me think more about my place in this world. About how small I am and how big the earth is. How we are just a small part of a much bigger universe. Putting things into that kind of perspective made me appreciate the joy and the love and the beauty I was finding as we all camped together with complete strangers (!) who'd all come to see this cosmic event.

And now I see... as I'm going home, preparing to get back to my everyday life, that these are the things that really matter: joy, love, beauty. And these are the things I need to work towards and be grateful for every day.

Joy, Love, Beauty. That's what these modern-day free-spirits took away from their time celebrating the eclipse.

It wasn't a full-scale sermon, at least not like the ones I grew up hearing that proclaimed the love, joy, and beauty of God, but it stuck with me in ways that great sermons do and forced me to wrestle with my own sense of awe and wonder.

Why wasn't it me - the preacher - who couldn't keep quiet about the joy, the love, the beauty of God's creation as we all boarded the plane from that magnificent experience and made the transition back to everyday life? Why wasn't I the first to see and proclaim the glory of God? Why wasn't it me who was returning home renewed and refreshed by the mystery of creation?

Maybe the disciples and I had some things in common... maybe we were the same kind of travelers... Respectful of the somber moods that overwhelmed our hearts. Heavy with the suffering we'd seen in recent days. Plagued with questions and grief that made us cynical for a time, hesitant - if not unable - to embrace the hope that we once held so faithfully. And full of the fatigue that so often accompanies our deepest emotions. Losing a Rabbi, a teacher, a friend... is painful. Going to the tomb is exhausting.

But as these disciples traveled that Emmaus road a peculiar stranger joined them on the way... Walked alongside them... Asked them questions about their lives and what they'd experienced in Jerusalem... Things he really should have known, but stories they really needed to tell.

The disciples could have asked him to go away, to walk a few yards behind or to go on up ahead.

They could have said they needed space. (That's what I would probably have said.) But they didn't. They hosted the surprising stranger, and allowed him to be a guest on their journey.

Then... when they got close to their destination, they invited Jesus to stay with them, because darkness was falling and the day was coming to an end. Where would he go, if not with them? They must have wondered. How could they leave him out here alone?

IV.

It wasn't until the dinner, even after spending the whole day walking and talking, it wasn't until he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them that they realized this stranger was no stranger at all.

And as quickly as they knew him, he was gone, "vanished from their sight," Luke says.

It was just a glimpse of resurrection that met them along the way.

And....It's the breaking of the bread that does it. It's when he breaks the bread that they finally remember where they have met this man before. It's when he breaks the bread, when the flesh of the bread is torn and crumbles to the table — it's then that their eyes are finally open and they can see what's really happening. It's when he breaks the bread that they are brought back from the shadows of death and they realize that life has won.

And that exact location - where bread is broken - is precisely where the church lives, gathered around the table, telling old, old stories...sharing the feast.

It is in the scriptures and at the table that the story breaks open for us, and we realize again [and again] that life has won. Sometimes though, if we are honest, that breaking open means not just rejoicing in the triumph(s) of life, but also opening our eyes to the broken places in our world... Opening our eyes to recognize that this place we live in, [is always halfway between the empty tomb and the kingdom of heaven]. And that in this in-between place - life is so often tinged by pain and grief, as much as is it filled with life and love.

But if the church really does live at the table around which bread is broken, then we have a resurrection story to proclaim:

One that remembers all these old, old stories, (how the resurrected Christ appeared to different people in different ways) One that insists life and love will prevail in the end, One that is learning that what looks like death at first, is really just the ground from which new life will emerge. One that proclaims the joy, the love, the beauty - and the mystery of life with God. And perhaps most importantly, one that is humble enough to know that the story is never complete until every Surprising Guest has joined us at the table.

Friends, I am afraid that we (the church) have forgotten this critical piece of our resurrection story.

As we have celebrated Easter throughout the millennia. We have told the story of how Jesus rose from the grave, but in our retelling I am afraid that we might have domesticated the story, taking out the critical element of surprise- which we find in all the biblical accounts, in every resurrection appearance.

I am afraid we have forgotten that we too might be surprised by the places and the people who offer glimpses of resurrection..that we, too, can miss, can pass by and dismiss the bearers of the good news!

As we make our walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus, which is in a sense a walk from the tomb to new life, a timeless metaphor for our own journeys from cradle to grave.

As we walk together, on this road, we need to ask God to open our eyes to the strangers around us, so that we might be renewed by all the surprising guests we've gotten good at ignoring.

If we learn anything today, may it be this:
that glimpses of resurrection are so often found at tables where breadcrumbs fall and broken people gather telling and listening to all the varied stories. and faithfully proclaiming the love, the joy, and the beauty of it all.