

**Believing is Seeing**  
**Sunday, March 30, 2008**  
**Luke 24:13 - 48**

**Amy Pagliarella Director of Children's Ministries**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Lake Forest, IL**

There's a very funny scene in the recent animated movie "The Simpsons." The Simpson family is in church – picture Homer, Marge and the kids sitting in the pews, worshipping, when Grandpa Simpson receives a vision from God. He writhes on the floor...he speaks in tongues. The family watches blankly as Grandpa rolls down the aisle, shouting a strange prophecy from God. Afterward, the church service simply continues and the Simpsons get into their car as if nothing has happened.

Finally, as they pull into the restaurant for Sunday brunch, Marge can take it no more. She cries out, "what's the point in going to church every Sunday if one of us has a genuine religious experience and no one wants to talk about it?" Homer responds, "Who wants waffles?" The kids pipe up from the backseat, "I want strawberries on mine!"

This is what comes to mind when I read this story about Jesus meeting some of his followers on the road to Emmaus. I see a vivid picture of this old couple, Cleopas and his fellow traveler, who I'm guessing is Mrs. Cleopas, just walking down the road alongside Jesus Christ, completely oblivious...clueless! I picture Christ walking along side them looking like, well, Christ, and I think, "how can they be so stupid? What kind of people take a stroll with Jesus and don't even know it?"

I guess I shouldn't be so surprised. In his lifetime, people just didn't get him. They witnessed Jesus perform miracles. Jesus knew things that no one else understood. But people just didn't get it. Why would things be any different now that Jesus has returned?

We can also assume that Jesus no longer looks like Jesus. He is clearly not a ghost, but his resurrected body would have changed somehow. Jesus shares some wonderful stories with the Cleopases, and explains their religious traditions in new and powerful ways, but it is not until they eat together that they recognize Jesus. Luke tells us, "When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."

So, two things need to happen before Jesus' followers understand.

First, Jesus shares in a familiar tradition. Jesus sat at their table, yet he acted as host – blessing and breaking their bread, and offering it to them. He evoked memories of a practice Jesus' followers had experienced many times. And so they recognized Jesus in this familiar ritual of the community, preceded by the stories and scriptures that Jesus shared.

The second thing is that God had to make it possible. Luke tells us that "their eyes were opened." This is clearly passive – Luke doesn't say that Mrs. Cleopas opened her own eyes. Rather someone – we assume God – opened them for her. As some scholars put it, "not getting it is part of a divine plan" (Boring, Eugene & Fred Craddock, **People's New Testament Commentary**, 279).

It seems that God wants Jesus' followers to experience Jesus in a very particular way. God wants the disciples to meet Jesus in the ritual and practice of the community, not on a solitary road. After Jesus breaks bread with the Cleopas family, he shares a piece of fish with the rest of his followers! This is a curious detail, but it is consistent with what Jesus did while he lived. He sat at table with the disciples – with anyone, really – and in the mealtime laughter and conversation, he came to know people, and they came to know him.

This isn't so very different from the way in which we meet Jesus. We meet Jesus in the practices of our community. Jesus told his followers the stories of Scripture...and when we worship God, we always hear the words of Scripture read, sung, and preached. Jesus sat at table with his disciples, just as we take communion together and then share in doughnuts and coffee in fellowship hall. The Church of England's Tom Wright tells us that these practices are intrinsically connected – sacrament is not just magic and scripture is not just an

intellectual exercise. We put them together and we have “the centre of Christian living” (**Luke for Everyone**, 297-8).

And all of this happens in community. Certainly we encounter God when we’re alone, but if no one ever tells us about God or shares any of these stories with us, how do we know?

A Jewish friend of mine told me that, as a child, her father resisted going to weekly services. “If I were God,” he would say, “I wouldn’t want people to go to synagogue. I would tell them to go to the mountains. ‘Go to the mountains,’ I would say, ‘enjoy the beautiful mountains I’ve made.’”

There’s something appealing about this. Mountains **are** beautiful. In the summer, they are often green and warm and perfect for hiking and picnicking. In winter, they are often snowy and cold and ideal for zooming downward and stopping for hot chocolate. If you could ski AND meet God at the same time, how great would that be?!? I’d take my study leave in Vail every year!

But hundreds of thousands of people go to the mountains each year. They go because they like the mountains – they go to ski...to hike, or to explore quaint little towns. But they don’t **necessarily** go to appreciate God’s creation, and they are not any closer to meeting God than they were before.

Is that because God isn’t in the mountains? Of course not! I believe that God is everywhere! But if we have no idea who God is...and no idea of what God looks like...Jesus Christ could be walking – or snowboarding – right alongside us, and we would have no idea.

So I don’t believe that anyone could go to the mountains, or the beach, or any other beautiful place on God’s green earth, and meet God, just like that. We have to know *something* about God first.

Last year, Andrew Thompson reminded us in the **Christian Century** (September 18, 2007, page 10) that when Jesus returned, he did so in a very particular way. He didn’t send a text message, or a downloadable podcast. He appeared in person, in the flesh, so to speak. And Jesus, by his very presence, compels his followers to get the word out.

When Cleopas realizes that Jesus just sat at his table, what do he and his wife do? Why, go to Jerusalem, of course! Join the other disciples! They seek out their community and share the good news. They seek out each other, and they try to make sense of things as a group.

And isn’t this what we do? We discuss the Bible in small groups because that is where we can better make sense of the often challenging stories in Scripture. We worshipped together last Sunday because on our holiest of days, we wanted to be together, and that our joy would be greater because our celebration was a communal one. I would feel rather foolish standing on my front lawn, yelling, “Christ has risen!” So we come here, because we know that someone will reply, “Christ has risen indeed!”

There is a wonderful children’s book that does a better job than I could explaining why we worship God together, and I’d like to read a little bit to you from, **Come Worship With Me**.

*“I know God is everywhere, rustling in the long meadow grass, whispering on the winds high above, singing chick-a-dee-dee-dee with the birds in the trees.*

*I know God is with me all the time, when I’m walking outdoors in the rain, when I’m tucked snug in my bed at night, or when I’m first to wake up in the morning and the whole house is quiet.*

*I know God is everywhere, but in one special place I feel closer to God than I do anywhere else.*

*Come with me. Come to my church. We worship God here, and that’s when I feel God the most.*

*I feel God when the music begins and the rumbling organ pipes make my feet tingle right through the floor. I feel God when our pastor smiles at us and says, “Good morning!” I feel God when the singing starts, and my dad and I share a hymnbook. He loves to sing.*

*I feel God when the whole church grows silent just before we pray. Even my little sister sits still and stops whispering.*

*You can feel God too. Come worship with me.”*

(Ruth Boling and Tracey Dahle Carrier)

You can feel God too. Come worship with me, and once you know God, you will meet God everywhere. Yes, even in the mountains. I took up skiing about 10 years ago, and I will tell you that the first time, I was not even dimly aware of God's presence on the ski slopes. I was focused on getting down alive. Was God in the mountains? Yes! Did I see God? No! I wasn't looking.

Five years later, just before a ski vacation, I spent a week at a monastery in Iowa. I woke at 3am each day to sing the psalms and spend the day in prayer, meditation, and Bible study. So by the time I arrived in the Rocky Mountains, I felt grounded in God. I had heard God in the psalms and music, and I didn't want that experience to end.

But when I started to ski, I found myself a little out of practice. If you're a skier, you know the challenge of being a Midwesterner who only gets out to the mountains a week or two a year. I was pretty wobbly on my feet, and very tentative.

After a shaky run or two, I heard a tune inside my head. A familiar and favorite tune.

*Spirit. Spirit of gentleness.*

I imagine that more adventurous skiers hear very different songs in their heads when they ski, but I hear hymns. *Blow through the wilderness, calling and free.*

And when I hear a hymn in my head, I feel a rhythm. *Spirit. Spirit of restlessness.*

Almost like a waltz. Definitely like a dance. I find myself skiing smoothly and gracefully. *Stir me from placidness, wind. Wind on the sea.*

When you're skiing in the mountains AND you're feeling confident AND you're having fun, you don't look straight ahead or focus on your feet. You look around you. And this is when, if you're ready, you realize that God is in the mountains.

And I feel this each and every time that I go back.

*Spirit. Spirit of gentleness.*

*Blow through the wilderness, calling and free.*

*Spirit. Spirit of restlessness. Stir me from placidness, wind. Wind on the sea.*

You cannot gaze at snow-capped mountains and not wonder who made them. You cannot feel the crisp air that gets colder and colder as you accelerate and not ask if the wind you feel is the wind of the Holy Spirit. You can take that tram to the very tippy top of the mountain, even if it's going to be really hard to ski down from there, just because you want to see the fullness of God's creation. There is nothing like it.

And is it possible that God is known to us more fully in the drinking of hot chocolate at the end of the day? It sure feels that way to me. Because when you have learned about God in church, and met God in the community of a church, when you go to the mountains, or the beach, or the city, or anywhere else in God's creation, you will find God again...because YOU are looking...and because God is looking for YOU.

Amen.