

Then Their Eyes Were Opened – Luke 24:13-35

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I knew it was Easter early this morning when I turned on the TV and saw Easter Mass at the Vatican in Rome. It is quite a spectacle: St. Peter's square with thousands of worshipers gathered, the liturgy, the vestments that the worship leaders wear, and the pope himself delivering his Easter homily, although not this year due to his poor health.

Critics of the Roman Catholic Church and mainline Protestant denominations we would label as "high church" say that the traditions of the church often get in the way of encounters with God.

All the liturgy, the old prayers that date back centuries, the clergy in their liturgical vestments like robes, clergy collars, and stoles, the old hymns that were written hundreds of years ago in old, complicated English. All of it is just so out of touch with contemporary society. That's the criticism.

Many protestant churches have taken action to change, doing away with much of the tradition. There's less liturgy, less formality, and younger music, shall we say.

Even the Farragut Presbyterian Church has loosened up a bit in its style. Our "casual service" is reflective of this.

But, the good thing about tradition, as I found this morning when I turned on the TV, is that it can trigger a connection and an experience with the Holy. In seeing St. Peter's Square this morning, I knew it was a holy day. It was

another reinforcement that death doesn't have the final word.

When Joey was five years old and we were at our former church, he and I were sitting at the kitchen table early in the morning on the Saturday before Easter mapping out the day in front of us. I had agreed to take him to a movie later in the day, which he was excited about (Jacob had something else going on that day). But before that, I said, we have to go to the church for what they called the Easter Egg-stravaganza.

"Oohh," he said. "What will we do there?"

"Well, there will be an inflatable bounce house." And his eyes lit up.

"And there's going to be a piñata for the kids to hit." And his eyes got a little bigger.

"And," I said, "there's going to be an Easter egg hunt."

And Joey's eyes got even bigger and he said, "Christ is risen indeed!"

Pinatas and Easter eggs can trigger recognition of the risen Christ.

On the day of the resurrection, a man named Cleopas and a friend of his were walking on the road to the town of Emmaus and they encountered a stranger who engaged them in conversation. And after telling this man what had just happened with Jesus of Nazareth, the stranger first shared with them the Biblical prophecy of how Jesus was to suffer and die before rising from the grave.

The two men were intrigued and invited the stranger to stay with them. He does so and sits down with them at their table. Then, he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it

to them. And with that very familiar ritual, it triggered the identity of this stranger. It's Jesus himself, alive! Their eyes were opened, Luke tells us, and they recognized him.

What did it take for Cleopas and his friend to recognize Jesus? It took two simple, but very traditional acts: the telling of the story of Jesus by Jesus and the breaking of bread.

Somewhere, they must have heard about Jesus' tradition of teaching and the last supper he had with his disciples, because it was when those traditions were renewed that they were able to recognize and experience the risen Jesus.

It can be in the traditions of our faith where we are more likely to encounter the risen Christ—a place, an action, the witness of someone we love through their generosity, or a piece of music.

Early in my ministry, I was called upon to conduct the funeral of an infant who had died upon her delivery. The young mother and father, whose wedding I had performed a year earlier, did not have a church home and had not been active in the church. So when I met with them to discuss the funeral service for their child, I assumed they would either not have any particular desires for music in that service or that they would want some sort of secular music to be played or sung.

But, amid their tears, they said that they had one request. They wanted somebody to sing "Amazing Grace" during the service. Because that's the hymn the young mom had grown up singing when she went to church with her

grandmother every week. And to have that sung at the funeral of their child would bring enormous comfort.

That hymn, that traditional old song, was what triggered the presence of the living God at that terrible tragic time. *Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.*

A pastor by the name of Gary Jones once shared his experience at a medical clinic where he had been treated for cancer.

“Not long ago, I had to return to the clinic to have my blood drawn and analyzed, just to make sure the chemotherapy wasn’t killing me. Those visits were hard, and I wasn’t eager to return. All the way there, I was dreading it.

“And when I arrived, I saw it was all pretty much the same – lots of bald people waiting to have their blood drawn or to receive a blood transfusion. Some with family members, others waiting alone, and a few with a kind of vacant look in their eyes. ‘How did I get here?’ they seemed to be thinking. ‘I’m going to die soon anyway; maybe I should just go home. But I’m afraid. Nobody knows what this is really like...if only somebody would hold me and love me....’

“And once in a while, a drug rep or a doctor would come walking briskly through the waiting room, heels clacking loudly on the floor, seemingly oblivious to the wasted patients around them. I remembered seeing such healthy and hardy people stomping by when I had been a patient – I remembered wishing they would slow down. I wanted them to realize that they were walking on holy ground here, and a gentler presence was called for. But then I remembered – this purpose-driven stride was the way I

had always walked through waiting rooms and nursing homes myself. I knew what it was like to feel very busy, with lots of important work to do.

“And then I noticed the sweet nurses who had played such an important role in my healing. I had hair now, so they didn’t recognize me. But they were still going up to the gaunt patients in the waiting room, smiling and calling the patients by name, putting their arms around these people who could hardly walk. ‘*Come unto me,*’ Jesus said, ‘*all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*’ This is exactly what the nurses were saying, in their gentle, loving and encouraging way.

“And then, I heard a nurse inside an adjacent room, flipping through charts, as she prepared to call her next patient. ‘Gary Jones,’ she said quietly and reflectively to herself. And then, as if suddenly remembering, she burst out loudly, ‘GARY JONES!’ and came running out of the room to where I was sitting. At first, she didn’t recognize me, because she had never seen me with hair. And besides, I had started weeping when I heard her calling my name. I don’t know what happened to me; I just couldn’t help it.

“But I recognized her. She had cared for me for months. She was my sister, my mother, my friend, my priest.... In the way that Jesus intended us to be for each other, I realized that she was my Lord, whom I recognized when she called my name.”

And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

We are the triggers by which others know that Christ is alive.

Look for the triggers of the risen Christ. Maybe it's in the breaking of the bread here at the table this morning. Maybe it's in the bonds of family or friends over a meal. Maybe it's in the simple gathering in this familiar worship space today. Maybe it's in the bond you have with others working to make change in the workplace or society.

Whatever the arena, may our eyes be opened and may we recognize the hope that comes in the One who has defeated death.

Thanks be to God.