

Walk Before the Lord

Psalm 116: 1-9

Luke 24: 13-35

We're in that post-Easter season of lectionary selections when we have Jesus making appearances and disciples trying to figure out what this resurrection faith means. For us, it isn't much different. Jesus' appearances to us may not be in the guise that has so often been portrayed. And let's face it, we often aren't too sure what this resurrection faith really means.

Jesus has shown himself to be pretty sneaky sometimes. Mary didn't recognize him at the tomb, yet when he popped in on the disciples last week, to Thomas in particular, everybody knew who he was. No one said, "Hey, who's that guy who just appeared out of nowhere?"

I mentioned last week that I was reading Barbara Tversky's book "Mind in Motion" about human cognition. She discusses the experience of "change blindness." It recalls for me a video. Since we're doing the sermon via video, I can just have you watch it now. Stand by.

the now well-known experiment of the "invisible gorilla" which is about "selective attention." Because I have already given it away, it won't work for you.

The experiment was a brief video with the instruction to count the number of times people in white shirts passed a basketball. The video begins with six people dressed in equal numbers of black shirts and white shirts passing two basketballs among themselves. In the middle of the video, someone in a black gorilla suit walks into the middle of the people passing the basketball, beats his chest, and walks off. The video closes by asking the correct answer. And then it says: "But did you also see the gorilla?" A remarkable number of people did not see the gorilla.

If you click on the link and watch the video, you will think it's crazy that someone could watch the video and **not** see the gorilla. However, you have already been primed to look for the gorilla. **The people participating in this experiment had no idea what would happen. They were focused on counting the number of passes made by those wearing white shirts. With their focus quite fully directed on one task, and not expecting anything else to happen, most never noticed the gorilla.**

If you counted the passes correctly, and you saw the gorilla, then tell me what large letter was written in two places on the wall.

This pattern of selective attention has highlighted the dangers of driving while engaged on your cell phone. As one's focus is quite fully directed to the phone conversation instead of driving, there is a strong likelihood that anything unusual happening won't be noticed, like a car moving into your lane, a child walking into the street, an object lying in the road, or a traffic signal changing, all of which are more dangerous than a video walk-through in a goofy gorilla suit.

“Change blindness” refers to a range of effects that make us blind to things that we don’t expect to see or want to see. If you’re in an unfamiliar part of town, you may be entirely focused on getting to your destination, missing all kinds of details that might be noticed. You didn’t see the statue of the dragon, the basketball court, the movie theater, or the guy who walked past you in a goofy gorilla suit. But you may have noticed the beggar with a coffee cup outside the laundromat, the car playing loud music, the police cruiser parked by the donut shop, and the woman talking loudly into her cellphone. Those latter items may have been signals of threats whose distinctive appearance or sound made you alert; the others didn’t. But really, you didn’t see the guy in the gorilla suit?

If you were looking for a dragon statue, a movie theater, a basketball court, or a guy in a gorilla suit, you probably would have found them. But on the other hand, you may not have noticed the beggar outside the laundromat, the car playing loud music, the police cruiser parked by the donut shop, and the woman talking on her cellphone.

In our resurrection faith, we want to be able to notice the things that we need to notice. That means changing the way we look at the world around us and changing our experience of that world.

The psalmist who wrote Psalm 116 has experienced a kind of resurrection and we can hear how his life has changed. He describes a near-death experience: *The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow.* We never learn exactly what situation was being faced. There is a similar psalm in Second Samuel 22, supposedly authored by King David, indicating an occasion of combat in war. In vs. 9, it says: *The Lord protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me,* which doesn’t sound like a combat situation. Verses 10 and 11 state: *I trusted in the Lord when I said, “I am greatly afflicted”; in my alarm I said, “Everyone is a liar.”* It sounds like the psalmist may have been the victim of a false allegation, placing his trust in the Lord while knowing that those in the world around were all liars. Further, in vs. 16, it says: *you have freed me from my chains,* indicating that the psalmist may have been imprisoned.

In any case, the psalmist believed his end was near and his future was hopeless. However, he believes that God saved him from a seemingly certain destiny with death in order that he *may walk before the Lord in the land of the living.* One can hear the sense of empowerment at knowing that God has returned him to life from his expectation of death. He proclaims his devotion to God, and, having seen the ways of the world exposed in their ugliness and indifference, he is grateful to be allowed to *walk before the Lord in the land of the living.* This means a new path to walk in his life, not in the ways of the world, but a walk before the Lord. The ways of the world have far less meaning whereas the way of the Lord has been shown to bring life out of imminent death that the world would have enabled, making a walk before the Lord the best way for the future.

In the passage from Luke 24, we find two of the disciples – one unnamed – walking toward Emmaus. These two are leaving Jerusalem and heading for someplace out of the reach of the authorities, likely further than Emmaus. They're on the run, even if they're walking. It's a logical move of self-preservation. If the worldly powers have crucified the leader, then the next likely step would be rounding up the followers for some further crucifixions. Presumably these two had heard the report about the empty tomb, but they have no idea about Jesus' resurrection.

As they walk along the road to Emmaus, the two disciples were having quite a discussion about what had been happening in Jerusalem. They didn't notice a fellow coming up and joining them in their walk. I'm sure this was disconcerting. I'm sure you've had the experience of going along in earnest conversation with somebody and then realize that someone *else* is suddenly close by. The stranger asks what they're talking about. They explain all of what had happened to this stranger who doesn't seem to know anything. They tell him about the promise, the crucifixion, the strange tales of an empty tomb, visions of angels, and the whole thing.

They showed their disappointment when they said, *but we had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel*. It seems the "road to Emmaus" had history in the Maccabean War around 140 BC. It was the site of a major victory for the rebels. In retaliation, the Romans burned Emmaus to the ground. The image the "road to Emmaus" is laden with recent history of violent rebellion in a nationalistic cause. That some disciples are on **this** road can be seen symbolically that they're on the *wrong* road, not the road that Jesus had called them to walk.

That would explain why the stranger gives them a bit of a tongue-lashing for being such doubters, for having forgotten the story of the master, and for failing to recognize what was really happening. The stranger was teaching them all over again what Jesus had been saying, trying to get them headed in the right direction.

The stranger acted like he was continuing along the road when the two decided to stop and call it a day – it was getting late. They invited the stranger to join them, still not knowing him to be anything more than a curious but intriguing stranger. Once again, we encounter the theme of blindness to the reality of the Lord that was so prevalent in John's gospel. It's evident here, too.

As they sit together at the table, in the breaking of the bread, they recognize Jesus. They're healed of their blindness – and then Jesus immediately disappears! How confusing is that? They're healed of their blindness as to who this guy is, and then when they recognize him, he disappears.

Anyway, the two disciples decide to return to Jerusalem, still a place of threat and danger for them. But now these formerly intimidated disciples seem renewed and inspired to serve the Lord whom they encountered. Jesus may never have told them, 'Turn yourselves around and go back to Jerusalem.' They knew that everything had changed with the resurrection of Jesus. There was something new going on that required their response. They hardly knew *what* this new thing was, but they

understood enough to change their direction and follow faithfully into a setting that they had been running from only moments before. They were going against the current of fear that the world had used to push them away. They were empowered to push back against the current of fear and walk before the Lord into his new life promise wherever that took them.

The resurrection faith needs its witnesses. The resurrection faith counts on its witnesses who can say, “This is the way; walk in it, walk before the Lord, not the world.” That means understanding how everything is changed. It means understanding a call to change our direction from the common paths that the world offers that leads nowhere near the Kingdom but into obedience to the world. Resurrection faith requires us to get in step with Jesus’ path toward the Kingdom, to walk before the Lord.

One of the things this pandemic has revealed to the people in our society is how woefully unprepared we are to deal with crisis, whether it is on the local, state, or national level. It has laid bare the fact that we offer next to nothing to those who fall on hard times, and many become resentful about being more compassionate, thoughtful, and generous.

If you become unemployed in Florida, your largest benefit is \$275 per week. You can receive that measly benefit for only 12 weeks. You must report on your efforts to seek employment each week. If you lose your job in Florida, you have probably lost any health benefits, too. In the middle of a pandemic. Or you may never have had any health insurance because our state refused to expand Medicaid for millions of possible beneficiaries.

Left to its own devices, the world doesn’t care. It will give you little and condemn you for having created your own problem. It will balk at having to lift a finger when you’re down and struggling. It will choose money, profits, and the prosperity of the few over the lives of many. That’s our current discussion.

In the Kingdom way, the witness of a resurrection faith values people over money, compassion over judgment, generosity over stinginess, and the well-being of all over claims of individual superiority.

This isn’t political, although some will insist that it is. It is a simple contrast of the Kingdom way over the world’s way. Walk before the Lord and you will have to walk in a different direction from the world. It isn’t optional for those who profess Jesus as Lord, as risen Savior, as bearing a resurrection faith. Walk before the Lord.