

Sermon on Luke 24:13-35

Have you ever watched the show Undercover Boss? The whole premise is simple: a CEO or high-level executive disguises themselves with a new haircut, different clothes, maybe a fake backstory, and then goes to work alongside their employees. They're stocking shelves, cleaning floors, working the register. And the people they're working with have no idea who they really are. They talk freely: They complain, they share their struggles. Sometimes they open up about things going on in their lives, whether it's financial stress, family burdens, or hopes for the future. And all the while, they are standing right next to the person who actually has the power to change things, and they don't recognize them.

But then there's always the reveal at the end. The boss sits them down and reveals themselves. And suddenly everything shifts- what they thought was just another ordinary interaction turns out to have been something much more.

Maybe you've seen the Saturday Night Live Star Wars spoof of Undercover Boss where Kyo Ren goes undercover as Matt the Radar Tech, but he's not so good at disguising himself.

But I always think about Undercover Boss when I read this story, as I imagine Jesus walking along with his disciples who don't recognize him. I mean, how could they not recognize him? I always wonder. But then I wonder for us – how often are we in the presence of Jesus and we miss it, because he doesn't show up in the way we expect?

This question is at the heart of our story today – because this is a story where Jesus shows up, Undercover Boss style, and his disciples don't recognize him. He just doesn't look like what they were expecting.

The story begins in a place of disappointment and sadness – much like most of the post-resurrection narratives begin. Two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem – where everything happened – Jerusalem – the religious heart of the people. Jerusalem, the place of the Temple, where the Passover crowds had gathered. Jerusalem – the place where Jesus had been arrested, tried, crucified. Jerusalem was where hope had risen—and where, for these disciples, hope had died.

They are heading toward Emmaus, which was about seven miles away. It's not a long journey by our standards today, but on foot, it's a pretty long walk. And it's not just distance, it is literally a descent. Jerusalem sits up high. It's elevated, built on hills. To leave Jerusalem is to go down. The road to Emmaus winds away from the city, along rocky paths, through valleys, past scattered fields and small villages. This would have been the kind of walk where you have time to think, to replay everything that just happened. Time for disappointment to really set in, and for these disciples, it does. This is the road people take

when they are trying to go back to “regular life” after everything they hoped for has fallen apart.

And as they are on that road, Jesus shows up – somewhere between the place where everything happened and the place they’re trying to return to. It’s not a road where they are anticipating a holy encounter. It’s a dusty road, in the in-between, where faith feels uncertain and the future feels unclear. And they don’t recognize him because they are only able to look back to Jerusalem and what happened in the past. They have heard about the women finding the empty tomb, but they can’t yet imagine what seems to be impossible.

And so when Jesus shows up, they don’t recognize him. Not because Jesus is hiding – not because he’s going “undercover” like a CEO in Undercover Boss, but because, as the text says, “their eyes were kept from recognizing.” We could just chalk it up and say, “it’s a mystery” and leave it there, but I think we can understand something about that kind of blindness.

Sometimes we don’t recognize Jesus either – not because he isn’t present, but because we are looking for him in the wrong places or in the wrong ways.

At this point, the disciples aren’t even really expecting a Messiah anymore. They had been expecting a certain kind of Messiah – one who was victorious, visibly triumphant. They had been looking for one who would overthrow the current order and fix everything. But then those hopes and expectations are dashed in Jerusalem. Perhaps they don’t even know what they are looking for anymore as they are walking along that road to Emmaus. And so when Jesus shows up as a stranger on the road, walking alongside them in their grief, they miss him.

They miss him when Jesus shows up in companionship, with questions. They miss him when all they can see is a stranger. They are still longing for certainty, for victory.

And that’s often how it works for us, too. We don’t recognize Jesus because we’re waiting for certainty, while he comes to us in conversation. We’re waiting for power, while he shows up in vulnerability. We’re waiting for a dramatic intervention, while he walks quietly beside us on an ordinary road.

But notice that Jesus doesn’t immediately reveal himself. Instead, he listens. He lets them speak their grief out loud. He allows them to name their disappointment. Only then, after he has listened, he begins to reframe their story.

Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interprets the scriptures. He shows them how what they experienced wasn’t the end of the story, but part of a much larger one. He tells them a story where suffering and resurrection are not opposites, but connected.

As Jesus speaks, something starts to happen within them that they still can't identify. Later they'll say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?" And that's the first clue in this story – before they recognize him with their eyes, they begin to recognize him with their hearts. The presence of Christ ignites something within them. Something that feels like truth, like hope, like a deep resonance they can't quite explain.

But they still don't fully see him. And they won't, not until they get to the table.

They arrive at Emmaus, and Jesus acts as though he is going on, but they urge him, "Stay with us." And so he does. And while they are sitting at the table, doing that very ordinary, familiar act of eating together, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. And then, finally and suddenly, their eyes are opened. They recognize him, and then, he just disappears.

I imagine that must have been frustrating to the disciples. Just when they see him, he's gone. But maybe that's the point. Because now they know how to see – they know how to recognize him. They don't need him to stand in front of them anymore. They recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

This story tells us something important about where we can find Jesus now – yes, we find him at the communion table, but even more than that, we find him in the ordinary acts that carry extraordinary grace. We find him at any table where people are fed, where community is formed, where strangers become neighbors. We find him in every act of feeding, of every meal shared, every moment of hospitality.

We also find Jesus on the road – in conversations and companionship, in the moments when someone walks with us through grief or confusion, and helps us see a little more clearly.

We find him in Scripture, when something stirs within us, when something burns within us, or when the story opens up in a way that helps us make sense of our lives. And we find him especially among those we don't expect, because the risen Christ first shows up as a stranger. And that means every stranger carries the possibility of encounter with Christ.

Some of you have already heard or read this story that I shared a month or so ago – but one morning, during our regular indoor breakfast, I was restocking items on the breakfast bar when an argument broke out, as it occasionally does. Voices were raised. Harsh words were flying. Someone called out, "Pastor, we need you back here!"

I invited one of the individuals to step into the hallway with me, and she did. We stood there for nearly half an hour while I simply listened. She wants her story to be told because right now, to her, it feels like no one is truly hearing.

Let's call her Rachel. I have known Rachel for a while, but this was the first time I had really listened at length to her story. As she spoke, it became painfully clear that she is exactly the kind of person our current system is failing.

Rachel lives with severe anxiety and mental health challenges that contributed to her losing stable housing and, years ago, custody of her children. Her anxiety is constantly sky-high. That anxiety makes it difficult for her to regulate frustration and anger, which leads to outbursts. Those outbursts then get her removed from shelters or services. When she is outside, she is cold and vulnerable. She is cited for trespassing. She cannot pay the fines because she cannot secure work or housing. Missed court dates, sometimes because her phone has been stolen and she cannot reach her lawyer, turn into warrants. Warrants turn into arrests (which lead to dehumanizing experiences in jail). Arrests turn into criminal records. And criminal records make housing and employment even harder to obtain.

Then she is back out on the street. Only now it is worse. More barriers, more instability, more anxiety, fewer options. Rachel told me she feels like everyone is always telling her what to do: "go here," "see this person," "do that," "you are the problem," "you need to fix yourself." She said she never feels truly heard and that she feels so powerless. She feels invisible, forgotten, cast aside. And in reality, she is.

I will confess that I have struggled with her at times. Her anger and aggression can be hard. It is tempting, even as a pastor, to keep her at arm's length. But standing in that hallway, listening, I realized something: what looks like defiance is often desperation. What looks like aggression is untreated trauma colliding with a system that punishes instability instead of actually addressing a multi-layered reality.

This was one of those moments for me where a shared meal and an encounter with another helped me to recognize Christ in a new way.

Every person we pass, every person we overlook, every person we dismiss, any one of them could be the place where Christ is already present, already speaking, already walking alongside us.

And that raises a hard question. Where might we be missing him? Where are we so certain about what Jesus should look like, or how he should act, that we fail to recognize him when he actually shows up?

Maybe we miss him in the person who asks hard questions instead of offering easy answers. Maybe we miss him in the neighbor who disrupts our assumptions. Maybe we miss him in the work of justice and mercy that feels too small to matter. Maybe we miss him because we're looking for something spectacular, while he's right there in the quiet, the ordinary, the relational.

The Emmaus story doesn't just tell us that Jesus is alive, it teaches us how to see him. It tells us that resurrection doesn't always look like what we expect. It looks like a stranger on the road, or maybe like conversation that changes us. It looks like hearts burning before eyes are opened. It looks like bread being broken, and shared. And once we begin to recognize him there, everything changes – because then we know how and where to look for Christ – and the more we look for him, the more we will find him.

After the disciples recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread, they turn around to go back to Jerusalem – the place of fear and confusion, the place where hope seemed lost. But they return with new eyes and a new story. They return with the hope of resurrection burning in their hearts.

And that's the invitation for us today too – to pay attention to the road we are on and who is walking beside us. The invitation is to listen for what stirs within us, and to practice looking for Christ in the ordinary, the overlooked, the unexpected. And perhaps the invitation for us is also to become the kind of people through whom others may recognize Christ – as people who walk with others in their grief, as people who make room at the table, who break bread and share it.

Today, may we recognize the risen Christ among us. Amen.