

*A Red Coat in a Gray World*  
May 8, 2011 Easter 3A  
Luke 24:13-35  
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I sometimes get in a rut. I notice it especially when I'm exercising. I'll take a walk along the same path week in and week out for what seems like forever. I once read that people who commute to work taking the same route every day are probably lacking in imagination and are likely to get set in their ways. I suppose the same is true for walkers and joggers. After I read the article, I thought to myself, "Great, I'm becoming my father."

In winter my rut gets worse. The sidewalks are slippery and I spend most of my time staring at the ground. Everything around me turns a shade of gray. I stop noticing things and instead get lost in my thoughts—work, family, sports, whatever. I might as well be sitting home with my eyes closed, because I often don't pay any attention to what's happening around me.

But then, every once in a while, by grace, there is something that cracks open my interior world. I wave at some children playing soccer in a front yard and they wave back at me. I give a thumbs-up to a fire truck as it races by and the driver honks the horn. I notice a bright light in a dining room window with a table full of guests and my heart is strangely warmed. I guess what I'm saying is this: these interruptions into my all-too-predictable routine make a difference. Suddenly my gray world has some color to it. Suddenly I can see possibilities that I could not see before.

Our gospel for today takes place on the road to Emmaus. The road from Jerusalem to Emmaus is seven miles. It winds up and down steep hills and through groves of olive trees. Cleopas and his friend are on that road. They're heading back home. As they follow the path, they're in the deepest of ruts, staring at the ground, lost in thought. You see, Passover is done. The rabbi from Nazareth is dead. And bitter disappointment has set in.

Sure, like a lot of people, these two have heard rumors—wild, reckless rumors about some women who'd gone to the tomb early that morning. But you can't put any stock in rumors. So Cleopas and his friend decide to ignore them and just keep walking.

Pretty soon a stranger comes up behind them. “Mind if I tag along?” he asks. “No, not a problem.” They don’t notice who it is. As Luke puts it, “Their eyes are kept from recognizing him.” Those eyes are a haunting part of this story, I think, because they remind me a little of my own eyes, because I’ve learned how easy it is to look out at the world and not really see what matters most.

The stranger asks these two what they’ve been talking about. They’re surprised by the question: “Haven’t you heard?” With heavy hearts, they rehearse for the stranger the events of the last few days: the terrible trial...the heartbreaking death...the too-good-to-be-true rumors about the tomb. Then the men sigh and say, “We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” There’s a pregnant pause as the words settle in. *We had hoped....* Who hasn’t said those words from time to time? “I had hoped to find a new job.” “I was hoping my husband would be home from Afghanistan by now.” “We had hoped the surgery would get it all.”

Such words are often painted gray with disappointment. What we wanted didn’t come. What came, we didn’t want. The result? Shattered hopes. The foundation of our world trembles. We trudge along on the road to Emmaus dragging our sandals in the dust. Sometimes we even wonder, “What kind of God would let me down like this?” And yet, isn’t it ironic, our eyes are so tear-filled and our perspective so limited that God could be the fellow walking next to us on the road and we wouldn’t even know it.

When we get into ruts as deep as those disciples, our problem is much the same as theirs. It’s not a lack of faith; it’s a lack of vision. For whatever reason, we cannot see where we’re going. We cannot see the possibilities in front of us, even if they’re staring us in the face.

But notice what happens next. It’s all so perfectly ordinary. The stranger gets into a conversation with our two heavy-hearted friends. Of all the things they could be talking about, they wind up talking about the Bible. The stranger uses the Bible to shed light on the events of the last few days. As he does, their hearts begin to burn. Pretty soon it time for supper. The stranger plans to go on ahead, but they beg him to stay. As they sit down, he gives thanks for the meal and breaks the bread. Right then—by grace—their gray, interior world gets cracked open. *It’s him! He’s alive!* And they are finally able to see.

Please hear me: to believe that Jesus is alive and loose in the world is to believe that there is no person or place or time where God cannot show up to make *us* more alive. Open up your Bible. Take a walk toward the communion table. Sit down for a heart-to-heart with an old friend. Sign up to help a homeless family through Interfaith Hospitality. Suddenly, by the grace of God, Easter breaks in. Christ shows up in the most ordinary of circumstances. Eyes get opened. Faith gets born. And we are unexpectedly alive with possibilities we did not see before.

Want an example of this? A couple of years ago there was an article in the Pioneer Press about two Twin Cities mothers—Sandy Masterson and Gwen Olsen. These moms had something in common, something tragic: they both lost sons in the Iraq war. As you might imagine, Sandy and Gwen were on their own road to Emmaus and the ruts were very deep. Their sons happened to be buried next to each other—head to toe—at Ft. Snelling National Cemetery. On separate visits to the cemetery, these moms noticed that their sons had been killed just six days apart and their birthdays were just seven days apart. These similarities were not lost on them. In the midst of profound sadness, they went looking for someone who could understand their pain. Says Sandy: “Our boys gave their lives and we were left holding this...emptiness. It’s a mother’s worst nightmare.”

One Memorial Day these two mothers met for the first time. They struck up a friendship. They promised to support each other. And so, while one hugs the gravestone of her son, the other hugs her. Gwen describes their friendship like this: “I think we both have tons of friends who would do anything for us, and they want to be there for us, but there’s nothing quite like knowing that there’s somebody who *gets* it. That’s been a real gift.”

So do you think these two mothers got together by coincidence? I don’t. God arranged it. We live in a world where Easter can break in at anytime. Christ comes to find us wherever we are. He comes to help us see possibilities we cannot see without him.

The good news on the road to Emmaus is this: even Cleopas and his friend don’t recognize Jesus, Jesus recognizes them. He sees them as if they’re the only two people in the whole world. And you know what, I think Jesus sees you and me like that too. In a

gray world where we sometimes notice so little, Jesus *always* notices us. He counts the hairs on our heads. He feels the pain in our hearts. And he *gets* it.

We see a glimmer of Jesus' watchfulness in the movie *Schindler's List*. In case you haven't seen it, the movie is a true story about a man named Oskar Schindler. Schindler was a wartime profiteer during WW II. He was a womanizer, a boozier, and a friend of the Nazis. Yet for reasons unknown, he became obsessed with saving as many Jews from the gas ovens of Auschwitz as he possible could. He put the Jews to work in his factories and ended up saving over 1100 of them.

The movie is filmed almost entirely in black and white. But every once in a while, usually in a crowd, you see a single splash of color—a young girl dressed in red. You spot the girl in a little red coat at a birthday party. You notice her red coat hiding under a bed while the Nazis set about searching the home for Jews. And then, quite sadly, you see a patch of the same red coat buried almost out of sight in a mountain of the dead after the Jews have been rounded up and killed.

Why is this girl wearing a little red coat? We're not sure. Maybe to portray the innocence of children. Maybe as a reminder of the blood that was shed. Or maybe it's more simple than that...maybe she wears it so that we cannot possibly miss her.

Because of Easter, I believe Jesus sees us wherever we are—whether we're walking down a deserted road or marking time in a grief-stricken cemetery. He sees us just as surely as we see that girl in red. Whether *we* recognize him or not, whether we always believe in him or not, he comes walking toward us. He comes with us along whatever road and ruts we happen to be traveling.

He comes offering peace for troubled hearts, a hopeful word for those who have lost their way, a little taste of bread to refresh us on our journey. It might not seem like much, but it's enough. You see, when you reach out and take the bread from him, by grace, you can see that his hands are pierced. And if you look a little closer, you can see that his white robe has stains of red. And if you look even closer still, and listen, you can hear him say, "I love you. I died for you. I'm alive. Mind if I tag along?"

Precisely here Easter breaks in. Eyes are opened. Faith is born. Hope springs forth. And you have possibilities whispered into your heart that you did not see before. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.