

## Gospel Eyes

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, May 8, 2011.

*Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:3, 10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35*

This is still the day of resurrection. The morning has come and gone, and it is now late afternoon. The sun will be setting soon, and we meet two friends of Jesus who, it sounds like, had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover, seen Jesus condemned as a criminal and then crucified and buried. This morning, they just heard some strange stories and now, as they are walking the seven miles back to their home in Emmaus, they are pondering the mystery. What just happened? How can it make sense? What are we to think?

The great expert of mysteries, Sherlock Holmes, had some interesting advice about solving mysteries. I'm a little reluctant to quote him as an expert since he's not real, but he had some good things to say. Sherlock Holmes would say, "If you keep on eliminating the impossible, whatever is left, however improbable, must be true."

That advice doesn't always work. When my daughter Julian was in college at the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit university, she once mentioned to her friends that her mother is a priest. There was a long pause. Then one of the girls, Roman Catholic, came up with the only image that she could find that fit her expectations and her view of the world. "So," she said, "your mom is a man?"

But what our friend Sherlock could teach us is that, when we are stuck, it is often because we won't admit to the possibility of an improbable. We have an imagination limited to what we expect to see.

So these two men—at first, the story says, their eyes are kept from recognizing Jesus. They thought they had heard and were part of the Good News, the Gospel that Jesus proclaimed. They thought that Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel—but then he was put to death as a criminal. Or was he? The story that they heard from the women in their group—Mary Magdalene especially—was impossible. They could not reconcile this strange news with the world that they know. They cannot see a reality other than the one that is right in front of them.

What keeps us from seeing? It might be that we have cynical eyes, or world-weary eyes, or eyes that have lost their imagination, or even eyes that are not accustomed to being challenged. It takes a kind of imagination to see a reality other than the world that is handed to us, that we take for granted, this physical, material world that seems to stop at the back of our eyeballs.

So Jesus leads the two disciples through what you might call a hiker's Eucharist. A seven-mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus—and in that time Jesus does essentially what we do in church during the first part of our Sunday morning service—what we call

the Word of God, or the Liturgy of the Word. He tells the whole story of the saving acts of God, from the exodus to the prophets, all the way to the way in which Jesus himself fit into this grand story. Moses, Elijah, David, Josiah, Amos and Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—all these stories make sense now.

One of the disciples, Cleopas, had said to Jesus, “We had hoped that Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel.” They had been stuck here. This was their mystery, the place they could not move past. Jesus begins to unlock their imaginations. Maybe he helped them to see that Jesus would not redeem Israel but would redeem the whole world. Maybe he helped them to see that what they had hoped for, is not enough of a hope—is too small a hope for God. And we know that he helped them to see that a suffering Messiah does not contradict a divine Messiah.

While Jesus talks, their hearts are burning within them. They cannot bear for him to leave, so when they reach Emmaus, they beg him to stay with them. And then Jesus does what we do in church during the last part of our Sunday morning service—what we call the Holy Communion. When he breaks bread and says his familiar blessing in his own characteristic way (and wouldn’t you want to know what that was?), their eyes are opened and they see—what? A person? The kingdom incarnate? The divine made flesh and now divine again? What is the Good News that they see at this moment? What unlocks their imagination so they can now see Jesus?

Jesus gave them *Gospel eyes*. Jesus did what the Church has learned is its mission in proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ—to lead us beyond the world that we see in front of us, the world of empire and let-down expectations and injustice and big and small vengeance traded back and forth. We are to go beyond all that and see with Gospel eyes what God has done for us. We are to go beyond the empire’s world and see the reality that God has made—a world in which, when we put Jesus to death, God responds with life. When we act with hatred in the crucifixion, God answers with love in the resurrection.

Sometimes we have to move out of our comfortable places to see the world differently than what the world wants us to see. I look at the eyes all around us. What do these eyes see? Whose eyes are they? Can they remind us to reach toward a different way of seeing, ourselves, each other, and the world?

Artist Ludmila Pawlowska, who created the icons on exhibit here, said that when her mother died, the world changed for her, so that she couldn’t do landscapes and portraits like she used to. So she turned to this deeply spiritual art, the art of icons, that invites us to see more deeply into the eyes of God.

Icons are a window to the divine, inviting us to look in and see beyond. Beyond empire, beyond triumphalism, beyond vengeance, beyond even our petty little resentments, beyond all that keeps us from seeing Christ in front of us.

In the same way, our Holy Communion is a window—it's a sacrament. It's a window to the divine. It's also a bold act, a courageous act, even. When Jesus broke bread with Cleopas and Mr. Nameless Disciple, they did this in defiance of the empire that killed him. They broke bread in communion together in defiance of the world of death and hatred. They broke bread in communion together as a subversive act that said, We stand for life. We stand for Love. We stand for God and God's world. So, too, when we break bread today, we do so as community and unity, in defiance against the forces that seek to divide us in hatred, war, and vengeance.

When we ask Jesus to be made known to us in the breaking of the bread, we ask him to lead us beyond our initial jubilation and relief at the death of Osama bin Laden, beyond our awe at the technological prowess of the modern military, beyond our pride that "We always get our man," so that we can look at some of the hard questions. Questions like, Where is the Good News—meaning, the Gospel—this past week? Where do these past week's events fit into our mission to promote God's Beloved Community? How do Gospel eyes see this evil man's assassination?

In the coming days and weeks, it will be important for us in the Christian community to think about where our Gospel values lie, and how we can with Gospel eyes see the death of Osama bin Laden and also the many, many people who have died here and abroad in the past ten years. If these questions make us uncomfortable, then we should take that to heart. If we can't answer these questions, we should take that as an invitation, a challenge for us to see better how Jesus is made known to us.

I invite you to look, and see, how Jesus is known to us. For the next couple of months, we have eyes all around us inviting us to look back at them, see the eyes of God loving us, or the eyes of ourselves loving God, and to be transformed. Take advantage of this Easter season to let your eyes be opened, your hearts be burning within you, and your mind transformed into a Gospel imagination that sees beyond. And with your new Gospel eyes, rejoice. The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!