

An Eye-Opening Experience
Luke 24:13–35
Saturday, May 7, 2023 (Easter 5)

Let us pray: Open our eyes, Lord, to your living presence – in this word, in each other, and in the world around us – that you might be made known to *us* as you were to those first disciples, in Christ. Amen.

Last week, my friend Jon flew up from Nashville to spend a couple of days with us. Jon and I have been friends for 25 years and, while we talk every day, we get to see each other *maybe* once a year, so I was really looking forward to this. We always try to get together the weekend of the NFL Draft. This is something we have done for 25 years, and it's how we first met. We sit around for a few days, watching TV, talking about football, and eating *way too much food*. When I go down there, we go to our favorite barbecue places in Nashville. When he comes here, he *has* to get a sandwich from Wawa, and he *has* to go to the Black Powder Tavern. And that's not to mention the chips and dips and cookies and snacks that we have spread out *while* we are watching the Draft on TV.

So he was here for two days, and we *did* eat way too much food, and it was just *great*. Not the food. The food was *fine*, but that didn't matter. What made it so great was that we sat there, around a table, for hours talking and laughing and catching up on each other's lives, checking in with each other, making sure we were *really* doing okay. The *food* was not the point. It was incidental to the whole thing; just an excuse to get together and talk. The *point* was what we shared with each other when we were around the table.

We are going to come to *this* table today, to share in the meal that Christ has provided with his body and blood. And when we *do*, the *food* is not the point. We try to *make it* the point. For

centuries Christians have argued about *how* we take this meal (by intinction or by passing trays), what kind of bread we use, how it tastes, whether we use wine or grape juice, whether it is literally, physically the body and blood of Christ or whether it is spiritual. But the bread and the cup and how we receive them, that's not the point. The *point* is what we share with God and with each other when we are at this table.

We are still in the season of Easter, and so we get this story from the *first* Easter of the risen Christ and two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. These two disciples are walking along, talking about everything that has happened over the past three days – Jesus' betrayal and arrest and crucifixion and death. They have heard *rumors* of his resurrection, but they haven't *seen* him. As they are walking along, Jesus comes up and starts walking with them. Except they don't *know* that it's Jesus. It says that their eyes are kept from recognizing him. Whether *Jesus* kept their eyes from recognizing him or it was just their own inability to *see* him, we don't know, but it doesn't matter. They are walking along, talking with this person who is a stranger to them, telling him about everything that had happened and their *disappointment* with it all. "But we had hoped," they say, "that he was the one to redeem Israel."

So then this stranger does what anyone would do the first time you meet someone – he tells them how *stupid* they are. "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not *necessary* that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then he does the *second* thing that any stranger does when you first meet and insult someone – he leads them in a Bible study. I mean just imagine that you are out walking in your neighborhood, and someone you've never met before comes up to you and says, "Hey stupid, let me tell you about Isaiah!" But Jesus walks them through the Hebrew scriptures,

explaining to them how Moses and the prophets said that what happened to Jesus was *exactly* what would happen with the Messiah.

They get to the village, but this stranger keeps walking. Well, they *like* him by now, so they say, “No, no, no, you stop and stay with us for the night!” Again, they don’t *know* it’s Jesus. They are just extending hospitality and kindness to a stranger. They go into the place where they are staying, and they sit down to eat. This stranger takes the bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them, just like Jesus had done three days earlier. And when he does this, their eyes are opened, and they *recognize* him. They see the risen Christ in this stranger. And then just like that, he’s gone. They get up and run the seven miles back to Jerusalem and tell the other disciples how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Now, that meal that they shared was not *communion*, right? They weren’t at a worship service in a sanctuary. They were just having dinner in someone’s house. It didn’t matter what *kind* of bread he broke, whether they were drinking wine or grape juice or water. It didn’t matter if he said the right *words* before he broke it. It didn’t matter whether they dipped the bread in the cup or ate the bread and then drank. We don’t even know that they *ate* it! It just says that he broke it, they recognized him, and then he vanished. They might not even have *eaten* the bread.

But that’s not the point. The elements that made up that meal were not the point. The *point* is what they shared with God and with each other when they were at that table. The *point* is how their eyes were opened to the presence of the risen and living Christ in this person who was previously unknown to them. And that is the point for *us*.

There may be people here in this room who are in some way *unknown* to you, whether they are literally strangers, or you don't know them that *well*, or they're just a *mystery* to you. There may even be people here that you have had some kind of conflict with. But when we share this same meal, the same bread, the same cup, we are in *communion*, not just with God, but with each other. That word *communion* comes from the Greek word *koinonia*, which means, "community." It literally means, "in union with." When we share this meal, we are *in union* with God and with each other. We are made *one*, across all the lines by which the world attempts to separate and divide us.

There is a poet named Naomi Shihab Nye who was once delayed in the Albuquerque, NM airport, and something happened that she ended up writing a poem about. I have always loved this poem, and I can never get through it, so just bear with me.

Wandering around the Albuquerque airport terminal,
after learning my flight had been delayed four hours,
I heard an announcement:
If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic,
Please come to the gate immediately.

Well – one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there.
An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress,
Just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.
"Help," said the flight service person. "Talk to her. What is her
Problem? we told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this."

I stopped to put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly. "Shu-dow-a, shu-biduck Habibti? Stani schway, min fadlick, shu-bit-se-wee?" The minute she heard any words she knew – however poorly used – she stopped crying.

She thought our flight had been canceled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said no, no, we're fine. You'll get there, just late. Who is picking you up? Let's call him and tell him. We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a Sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers, and two little girls for our flight ran around serving it, and *they* were covered with powdered sugar, too.

And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – has seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.¹

This meal is not communion. The bread, juice, wine, whatever, that is not communion. They are the *elements* of communion. But *communion* is what we share with God and with each other when we are at this table. And not just *this* table, but *any* table and *every* table.

When I was sitting at those tables eating with my friend Jon, we were sharing communion, not because of the *food* that we were sharing but because of the *love* that we were sharing.

When we sit around tables in the Fellowship Hall on Wednesday nights eating dinner, we are sharing communion, not because of the *food* that we are sharing but because of the ways that we are *made known* to each other.

¹ Naomi Shihab Nye, “Gate 4A” <https://poets.org/poem/gate-4>

When you sit at the kitchen table eating dinner with your family, or at a restaurant table eating lunch with friends, you are sharing communion, not because of the *food* that you are sharing but because the risen and living Christ is present in each and every person there.

This meal is not the point. It is not the end in and of itself. It is a *means* to an end. The *point* is for this meal to equip us to see the risen Christ all around us, in every meal that we share, in every encounter with every person. It's like we practice having our eyes opened *here*, recognizing Christ in each other, so that we can go out and recognize Christ in everyone else.

And if we can *do* that, if we can have our eyes opened and see the *humanity* and the *presence of Christ* in each other, then all the other problems that divide us will be taken care of. Because you won't allow someone to live in poverty if you truly see Jesus in them. You won't allow someone to go hungry if you truly see Jesus in them. You won't allow someone to be oppressed or to live in injustice if you truly see Jesus in them. You won't hate or ignore someone who is different from you if you truly see Jesus in them. You cannot allow someone to suffer if you truly come to *know* them and see Jesus in them.

That is the challenge. Not just to experience Christ's presence *here*, in *this* meal, at *this* table, but to experience Christ's presence in *every* meal, at *every* table, and then hopefully when there *is* no table. That is what we practice here. That is what this meal shapes and molds us to do. That is the world we want to live in. The shared world. And that can still happen anywhere. So let us prepare to practice now, having our eyes opened, that the risen Christ might be made known to us in the breaking of the bread, *here* and *everywhere*. Amen.