

April 23 -Did the Disciples Get It? Do We?
Luke 24:13-35

Have you seen the commercial for some type of medication in which the blind person speaks about not having cues to distinguish day from night? The condition even has a name: non-24 sleep-wake disorder. These blind people cannot tell when it is day and when it is night, important cues telling all of us when we are to be active and when we are to sleep.

Last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection, Jesus being raised from the dead. The light of the world has returned, and yet... Those who had been around Jesus didn't immediately see the light, didn't understand what was happening. They were not able to distinguish the resurrection cues showing them new life.

The first account of this "resurrection blindness" is found in John 20:1-10. It is the first day of the week. Mary Magdalene and other women have found the tomb empty. When Peter hears this he and "the other disciple," thought to be John, run to the tomb. Verse 9 of that passage tells us, "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." They were spiritually blind.

You have received a blindfold. If you put it on and wear it, can you see? If the blindfold works as designed, you should see nothing, not even light! When we can't distinguish light from dark, we are essentially blind, unable to get our cues for living from the light and dark around us. We have a glimpse of what it is to be blind. And like those trying to understand what had happened to Jesus, are we spiritually blind?

We read about Peter and the other disciple, "For as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" Yet Jesus had told them....

The disciples had traveled with Jesus for three years. More than once, he had told them what was to come:
If I be lifted up, I will draw all people to me

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Matthew 16:21-23 – Mark 8:31-38 -- Luke 9:22-27
Matthew 17:22-23 – Mark 9:30-32 – Luke 9:43-45
Matthew 20:17-29 – Mark 10:32-34 – Luke 18:31-34

John:

12:7-8 – let her keep it for the day of my burial (anointment used by Mary on Jesus' feet)

14:25-31 – These things I have said to you while I am still with you. I go away...I will no longer talk much with you

The disciples must have been puzzled. How could Jesus talk about being put to death, about going away? Perhaps they simply could not process what Jesus was saying. These predictions "did not register" in their memories. And now they are looking at the empty tomb...

Later this resurrection day, two of Jesus' followers, Cleopas and another, are walking to Emmaus from Jerusalem. They are trying to make sense out of the day's events. As they walk, they revisit the events of the preceding days: Jesus' death on the cross, the women finding the tomb empty just that morning. As they talk, a man joins them, one who seems to be oblivious to these recent events: "Haven't you heard," they ask, because the man seems not to know what has happened. After telling this stranger of these recent events, he recounts to them, beginning with Moses, the words of the prophets "concerning Himself," concerning the Messiah. When the three stop for the evening, the stranger indicates he will continue on. Jesus will not force himself on us. But the two insist the stranger join them. It is only when he blesses and breaks bread with them that they recognize this stranger isn't a stranger; this is Jesus! Their "eyes were opened," and Jesus vanishes. They say to one another, "Was not our heart burning within us while He was talking to us on the road, as He opened the scriptures to us?"

There is none so blind as those who will not see – the words found in a 1970 popular song, "Everything Is Beautiful" came to mind as I was reflecting on the disciples' blindness. And then I 2

discovered that saying has been around since 1546, attributed to John Heywood. AND it is very similar to Jeremiah's lament about foolish people without understanding in Jeremiah 5:21: these people "have eyes and see not, ears and hear not." Blindness, spiritual blindness, has been with us through our history.

More than once, as the disciples traveled with Jesus, they had eyes but did not see and ears but did not hear. Their blindness was not limited to resurrection day.

There are a number of scripture passages I could have used to illustrate the disciples' "blindness." I've chosen two.

The first illustration is when children were brought to Jesus that he might bless them. The disciples made every effort to keep the children away. Remember, children had no status in Jesus' time. Important people weren't to be bothered by children. Jesus' followers had eyes that did not see.

Mark 10:13-15 "People brought their small children to Jesus so that he could lay his hands on them to bless them. But the followers told the people to stop bringing their children to him. Jesus saw what happened, He did not like his followers telling the children not to come. So he said to them, "Let the little children come to me. Don't stop them, because God's kingdom belongs to people who are like these little children. The truth is, you must accept God's kingdom like a little child accepts things, or you will never enter it."

And a second illustration: when thousands gather to listen to Jesus' teaching, the disciples have eyes that do not see. They become concerned about how to feed so many. There are two accounts of feeding thousands of people. These are found in the gospels of both Matthew and Mark.

Mark 6:14-44 contains the first account of feeding the crowd, a crowd of 5000 people

The crowd was fed with 5 loaves, 2 fish
There were 12 baskets of leftovers

Just two chapters later in Mark, we read a second account of feeding a crowd, this crowd was 4000 people.

Mark 8:1-10 – In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, Jesus called his disciples and said to them, I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat...His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?"

This time there were 7 loaves, then a few small fish

7 baskets of leftovers were collected after everyone was fed

Bible scholars agree the existence of these two accounts indicate two separate events. Mark even says "when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat." And again the disciples say, "How can we feed so many, out here, away from sources of food?" And again, Jesus asks "What do we have?" and then from the little immediately available feeds the entire crowd. Once wasn't enough for the disciples: they didn't understand Jesus' compassion. They didn't understand that through Jesus little can become more than enough. How can we feed so many... Even though he had done it once...O ye of little faith...

We are blinded to what does not fit our preconceived ideas, our routine ways of living. Or perhaps the disciples simply didn't want to be bothered with so many hungry people. We can be blinded to what we do not want to see.

And that was true of the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' time. They were blinded by what they did not want to see. Frequently as the gospel writers told the stories of Jesus' life and his teachings, they placed accounts of Jesus restoring sight to the blind close to stories revealing the blindness of the Jewish leaders. Such a sequence is found in John 8 and 9. In chapter 8 Jesus was in the temple teaching. Pharisees challenged Jesus when he said, "I am the light of the world." They said, "You cannot testify that you are the light of the world. Jewish law required at least 2 witnesses to establish whether a claim were true." A lengthy exchange follows in the rest of chapter 8. 4

Before the Jews can stone him (recounted at the end of chapter 8), Jesus left the temple. Along his route, he saw a blind man (as told in chapter 9). Again saying “I am the light of the world,” as he had said in the temple with the Pharisees listening, Jesus restored the blind man’s sight. At the end of Chapter 9, we read of the connection between the Pharisees’ blindness as to Jesus’ true identity, recounted in chapter 8, and the healing of the blind man in chapter 9: Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind. Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “ Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see,” your sin remains.”

Often, the Pharisees, scribes and other leaders demonstrated their spiritual blindness: who is this man, they continued to ask. How dare he call himself the Son of God, they said. Their blindness was so complete, they even attributed Jesus’ works of healing to Beelzebub, the prince of darkness, the ruler of this world.

Often, the disciples, too, demonstrated their spiritual blindness. They watched Jesus heal and perform miracles; they listened to Jesus teach. Yet they tried to maintain existing power structures, only substituting Jesus and themselves for those currently in power. Yet the disciples failed to learn and act on what they had learned, asking again, “How do we feed so many?”

And so the disciples became despondent and defeated when Jesus died on the cross. Even the empty tomb wasn’t sufficient, wasn’t enough, to restore their sight.

Have our eyes been opened to who Jesus really is? Has Easter restored our sight so we can see more clearly? You also have been given sunglasses. These remind us our sight may be better now but it will never perfect, this side of heaven.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12, we read...

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“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, in a riddle, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” We may not see perfectly, but we can see more than what blindness, spiritual blindness allows.

How do we choose to respond to the light of the world? Will we cling to our blindfolds, unable to glimpse Jesus and the ministry we are called to do?

After our Easter celebration will we return to our old routines?

That’s what Peter, James, John and Nathanael, four of the disciples, did. Jesus was gone, what were they to do now? These four disciples’ answer was to return to what they did before they had left all to follow Jesus; they went back to fishing, where Jesus found them, again.

After our Easter celebration will we huddle together in our churches, fearful of anyone we don’t know and don’t understand? That’s what some of the disciples did as they gathered in a locked room, afraid of being connected with the crucified one, afraid to boldly proclaim Jesus’ love for all.

After our Easter celebration, or our Christmas celebration or even our own baptism, the excitement dwindles. “Wow, Easter was great, now back to the predictable, comfortable routines.” But these events, these celebrations are important, what last week I called a “BIG DEAL.” Through our sunglasses, our dim vision, we see the light of the world—the risen Jesus—and we are called to actively share the good news!

Do we return to our old, comfortable routines OR do we choose to receive the power of God’s Holy Spirit and, free of fear, go out to tell everyone we meet of God’s love through Jesus Christ for them?

While the disciples may have been a bit slow grasping what Jesus was teaching and showing them, ultimately they “got it” and “got it in a BIG way! The book of Acts tells us how the church got its start: the disciples and other followers, in the power of God’s 6

Holy Spirit, told the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection—over and over and over again. They were excited to tell the story. The books of Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, demonstrate that new churches were established as groups of believers gathered to worship together. Jesus changed the lives of the disciples so they could change their world.

Can we be like Cleopas and the other and become so excited about our personal encounter with Jesus that immediately we get up to travel, on foot, the 7 miles back to Jerusalem even though it is late and we are tired? Can we be like Cleopas and the other and become so excited we must tell others of seeing Jesus, of hearing him teach again and breaking bread with him?

Are we blind – hold up blindfold – spiritually blind?
Can we begin to see the light, God's light in Jesus' Christ?
Can we become so excited about God's great love for us—and for others--we must go, we cannot keep from going, into all the world teaching and baptizing? Have we allowed Jesus to transform our lives so we can transform our world?