

Easter 3A
Peace, Seattle
April 30, 2017
Luke 24:13-35

RECOGNIZING JESUS WHEN HE COMES

It's Friday morning in the middle of rush hour when he emerges from the DC subway station and places himself beside a trashcan against a wall. By most measures, he's nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a baseball cap.¹

Removing a violin from its case, he puts the case on the floor, throws in a few dollars as seed money, and begins to play.

Over the next 43 minutes, as he performs six classical pieces, 1,097 people pass by. Each one has a quick choice to make:

- Do I stop and listen?
- Do I hurry past?
- Do I throw in a buck?
- Do I have time for beauty?

On that Friday in January, those private questions were answered in an unusually public way. You see, this performance was arranged by The Washington Post as an experiment in context, perception and priorities: In a setting like this, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?

No one knew it, but the fiddler at that Metro station was Joshua Bell—one of the finest musicians in the world—playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most lauded violins ever made—a 3½ million dollar Stradivarius.

Three days before, Bell had filled Boston's Symphony Hall—where the merely pretty good seats went for \$100 a pop. But on that Friday at that DC station no one expected Bell, and he became one more busker, competing for the attention of busy people on their way to work.

How did he do? Video of the experiment tells the story.

In the 43 minutes he played, only 7 of the 1,097 passers-by stopped long enough to take in a minute or more of the performance; 27 of them dropped money in his case. With the consistent exception of young children, each of whom tried to stop and listen before being whisked away by parents, the overwhelming majority of people hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, with hardly a glance.

Two disciples of Jesus travel from Jerusalem to Emmaus, trying to put distance between themselves and the city that had become, in the wake of their Lord's crucifixion, a symbol of death.

Their leader had been betrayed and murdered. Justice had been stood on its ear. The City that welcomed him with open arms had chewed him up and spit him out. How did it come to this?

In the midst of their struggle to wrap their minds around it all a stranger joins them, and it isn't long before he, too, is caught up in the conversation about what had happened and what it all might mean.

¹ The story is based on an article by Gene Weingarten in *The Washington Post Magazine*. April 8, 2007, and is edited for length. The full article can be found here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html?utm_term=.e244b65f8e00

A shorter article based on this story appeared in *The Lutheran Magazine*, December 2013, pp. 38-40.

WE HAD HOPED, they tell him, **THAT JESUS WAS THE ONE!** “We had hoped!” Past tense.

But the stranger does not accept their loss of hope as the end of the story.
And as they walk along, it is he, who becomes their teacher.

WAS IT NOT NECESSARY, he says, **THAT THE MESSIAH SHOULD SUFFER THESE THINGS, AND THEN ENTER INTO HIS GLORY?**

Cleopas and his companion (Is it his spouse? A sister? The text doesn't say) **aren't sure what to make of this.** Later they'll remember how their hearts burned as he spoke—as if their bodies recognized something that their minds could not. But at this moment, as they walk along, they fail to recognize who he is. Their eyes remain closed.

Luke says, THEIR EYES WERE KEPT FROM RECOGNIZING HIM. As if to say, THERE IS A DIVINE HAND INVOLVED HERE. As if to say, THE TIME TO SEE WILL COME—BUT NOT JUST YET.

The experiment with Joshua Bell asked:

In a commonplace location, at an unexpected hour, do we expect—will we recognize—beauty?

Today's gospel asks: At unexpected times, as we go about our journeys, do we expect—will we recognize—Christ?

Our adult class is reading a new book these days by ELCA Pastor and Bonhoeffer scholar Mark Bocker, called COMING HOME TO EARTH.² In the book Bocker makes the case that salvation is less about leaving Earth to be with Christ than it is about discovering Christ in our midst—especially among those who suffer—including the threatened creatures and ecosystems of this world.

Echoing words that German Pastor and Nazi resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison before his death, Bocker asks: Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

His answer, with Bonhoeffer, is that Jesus Christ is the one who enters fully into the suffering of this Earthly realm, for “only a suffering God can help.”³

The cross is Jesus' supreme act of being there for others, and the resurrection is the affirmation that being there for others is God's way in the world. Resurrection, then, isn't about leaving Earth behind to go be with the risen Christ, for the risen Christ is to be found right here, in our midst.⁴

But will we, do we, recognize him?

The stranger who meets the two on the road to Emmaus tells them they must look to the Scriptures to unravel the mystery of a suffering Messiah. And they start to get that...sort of.

But by then they've reached their destination and he seems poised to go on.

STAY WITH US, they plead; and he does. And at the meal, as he blesses and breaks the bread, the scales suddenly fall away, and, finally, they recognize HIM.

² Mark Bocker. *Coming Home to Earth*. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016) p. 17.

³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (DBWE 8), 479, cited in Bocker, p. 62.

⁴ Bocker, p. 62.

Through the centuries, attempts by scholars and archeologists to pinpoint the exact location of the village of Emmaus have failed. Why?

Perhaps Emmaus is any place, and any moment, where followers of Christ come face to face with their risen Lord.

Let us pray.

Crucified and risen One, you ever surprise us by coming into our midst when and where we least expect you. Once more, this day, you keep your promise to offer yourself in your holy meal. Break bread with us, Lord Jesus, and open our eyes so that we may come to see you in sister and brother, friend and stranger, suffering world and suffering creation. And recognizing you there, embrace you and welcome you in.

Amen.