RECOGNIZING THE PRESENCE

When our children were young, some of their theological ponderings came out in efforts to come to grips with questions about God’s location. The old traditional answer that had been shared with many generations was that God is up there in heaven overseeing what is going on down here. But for more recent generations who have now seen what is beyond earth’s atmosphere, deep space that doesn’t look much like descriptions of heaven, that answer of God being up there in heaven may not be as acceptable as we thought it once was. As youth and adults journey through life, many also struggle with a similar question, particularly when significant changes are occurring, so they ask: ‘Where is God in this time of need?’

That may have been the question that was on the mind of Cleopas and his unnamed traveling companion. Luke doesn’t tell us who that second one is, but they were followers of Jesus who were distraught that he had been crucified. On that Sunday afternoon, they were processing their feelings as they walked the seven miles from the main city toward a town called Kensington, I mean Emmaus. The two of them were talking about the unsettling events they had just been through when a third person began to walk along with them, and asked them what they were discussing as they walked along. The narrator lets us know this was Jesus, unrecognized, undercover, incognito. In response to the stranger’s question, the duo stands still, looking sad, Luke tells us. They express surprise that he would not have heard about the dreadful events that had taken place in Jerusalem in the previous days.

Ironically, they begin to tell this fellow traveler about Jesus, who they described as a prophet in word and deed. They said they had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel, but that he had been executed. Now it looked like their hopes had also been put to death. They had held expectations of Jesus that he hadn’t been able to meet. So the next part of the story they tell did not mean much to them, the part about the women seeing a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive. Perhaps they didn’t want to risk entertaining new hopes that could easily get dashed, so they took off and left town. But they told their fellow traveler about it, saying, “Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” More irony - these two disciples, looking at Jesus, not recognizing him, are telling him, those others did not see him.

So we have Jesus meeting the two of them where they were and journeying along with them. He listens to the pain or even despair that was in their hearts. Then he shares with them the passages throughout Hebrew scripture that would help them understand how it would come about that the Messiah would suffer and then reveal God’s glory. He connected their story to God’s larger story as a way to totally reinterpret what they had experienced.

They reach what they thought would be their destination for the night. The third person on the journey seems to going on, but they urge him to stay with them. It will soon be dark and you don’t need to be out there walking alone. Was it an act of kindness or an act of passion to ask him to stay? Something had happened to these two. Something, Someone had overtaken their hopelessness. Life that had been drained of meaning had been given a plug and something meaningful was happening and they wanted that, they needed that to continue. Luke continues the story: “So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”
What led to their eyes being opened? Sure, it was after that regular moment of eating became a sacramental moment when the guest becomes a host, takes bread, blesses it, and breaks it in order to give it to them. But I have to imagine Cleopas and the second person would have still been in the dark had their risen Lord not found them in their time of great need and walked with them, if he had not listened to what was on their hearts and cared about their pain, if he had not connected their story to God’s story with them, if he had not acknowledged that he shared in their need of shelter, rest, and sustenance. Yes, there is that moment of recognition about the One who is present with us, whose presence makes all the difference in how we interpret what has happened and what is possible. But it may require all those previous moments to reach the moment of recognition about the living One, the source of our liveliness who indeed is present with us. Not to worry about whether we take all the right steps to reach recognition, for the road to Emmaus story shows us that when his followers need him most, the risen Lord finds them and journeys with them. When they are trying to come up with their own answers to the confounding world as they perceive it, Jesus makes himself radically known in their midst and redefines their world. I don’t think resurrection can be proven, but it can be experienced as we realize that our risen Lord is present with us even in, particularly in our times of confusion and bewilderment, when we pour out our hearts with our pain and loss, when we listen for how God’s story intersects our story, when we break bread with one another at the Lord’s table or at a table in the social hall or in one another’s homes.

Yes, this was a story about Cleopas and a person Luke does not name. Perhaps Luke has left this name to be filled in by your name or mine. Their bewilderment journey became a faith journey, a resurrection of faith journey. They were so filled with vitality by what they had experienced, that they changed their minds about their destination for that day and rushed off to tell the others that they had experienced the resurrected One. And they get connected with others who also had been blessed by the presence of the risen Lord. They didn’t just recognize the presence – they were transformed by it.

Warner, you have many gifts here as you continue your journey. But that which gives me greatest confidence for you is that you have a risen Lord, the source of faith and hope, who shows up in the time of greatest need and enables folks to see things very differently, who helps them to find new understanding of what God is doing, and to join in sharing that good news that God is not way up there somewhere, but comes into our midst and makes all of the difference in the world. Yes, there were two who went on a journey – one was named Cleopas and the other was named – well, you know.