

WGUMC May 12, 2019 "Your Personal Aldersgate"
Luke 24:13-35

May 24th is Aldersgate Day. For you non-Wesley nerds, that's the day in 1738 that John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed. He had been going through a personal crisis. He had lost his faith. As an Anglican clergyman, he felt like an imposter. Reluctantly, he went to a Bible Study on Aldersgate Street. About 8:45 pm, just as someone was reading from Luther's commentary on the Book of Romans, something happened. This is what Wesley recorded in his journal: "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given *me* that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."

John Wesley knew the Bible backwards and forwards. To read his sermons or his personal letters is to read one long string of Bible quotations. His everyday speech was the language of Scripture. But

he would be the first to tell us that knowing Scripture is no guarantee of knowing the Savior.

Which makes me think of our poor disciples in Luke's Gospel this morning. They, too, are in a crisis of faith. They hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, but he was killed and buried. Now some women are spreading rumors that he is still alive which goes to show you what grief does to you. But for these disciples, hope is dead, so they are heading home to Emmaus. Still, they wish they could see him again.

Preparing for this sermon, I went on a little walk to Emmaus myself. I didn't go on the retreat of the same name, but I intentionally walked through my week hoping to see Jesus. It was a busy week. I had been invited by a past president of the LDS church in Almaden to attend a special tour of the Oakland temple. It has undergone a major renovation and is being opened to the public for the first time in 55 years. On Thursday, I got in on one of the VIP tours. It was led by a church leader from Salt Lake City who is in

charge of all of the LDS temples around the world. The outside is very imposing, but when you walk into the temple itself you are greeted by a gigantic painting of Jesus, of the Warner Sallman style: a very northern European Jesus, a gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Throughout the temple, there were several other paintings of the same type. Now I truly enjoyed the tour. Our guides were very gracious, very sincere, and I could tell that they truly believed that this temple is where God draws near to them. But try as I might, I didn't see Jesus there.

In my carpool up to Oakland was the priest from the Greek Orthodox Church in Almaden, so after touring the temple, he invited us next door to sneak into the Orthodox Cathedral of the Ascension. That church is incredible, with all the mosaics and painted icons and the smell of incense. On the ceiling is a huge icon of Christ Pantocrator ("Almighty Ruler"), looking very stern and judgmental. But as beautiful as the Orthodox Cathedral is, I didn't see Jesus there, either.

On that hilltop in Oakland, we went from one extreme to the other, from milk toast Jesus to Militant Christ, and in neither of those images did I recognize Jesus.

But it brought me to an aha moment: in all of the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the Gospels, none of them take place in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus appears in the garden, in an upper room, at the lakeshore, on a road, on a mountain. About the only place Jesus doesn't appear is in a house of worship. So where am I going to see Jesus?

In Luke's Gospel, some disciples are on a road when they meet their master, but to them he is just a stranger. Imagine yourself on an airplane, rushing back home to attend a family funeral. You're in grief, you're in pain, and the person sitting next to you wants to strike up a conversation. You don't want to talk, but you're trapped. In your mind, you are saying, "Don't you know the terrible thing that has just happened to me? And I had hoped that the surgery would work, that the drugs would be effective, that the end wouldn't come

before I could get there.” Now this traveler butts right into your grief, asking all kinds of nosy questions. Worse yet, he is offering his own judgment on your situation. You are tempted to say, “Don’t you know that when it comes to people who are grieving, you’re just supposed to shut up and listen?”

In the presence of grief, it’s often better to keep quiet because we don’t have any of the answers, but Jesus does, so on the road to Emmaus he opens the Scriptures and begins to interpret them so that these grieving disciples can begin to understand why the Messiah had to die. But even then, they don’t recognize him.

That gives preachers like me some comfort. When we are expounding on the Scripture and look out at blank faces, it’s just good to know that that happened to Jesus, too.

What do we mean when we say that the disciples didn’t recognize him? The Greek word for “recognize” is *epi ginosko* and it means “to know fully.” The disciples had seen Jesus around Galilee,

in Jerusalem, but they didn't fully know him. They didn't really know who he was or why he came or why it should matter to them.

On Friday, still looking for Jesus, I went with Hank to see the Monet exhibit in San Francisco. We didn't get the audio tour so as I moved around the gallery, I had a keen sense that I was seeing but not really knowing the paintings. If I had studied art history, if I knew the themes and techniques Monet was using, the paintings would mean a lot more to me.

I felt like those disciples, seeing but not fully knowing what was right in front of me. That happens a lot to Christians as we read the Bible. We see the words but we don't fully know what they mean. So we get scared away from Bible study. But here is something I have learned about the importance of reading the Bible. It isn't that we are going to read something and then fully understand it. But Monet just kept painting those water lilies, and if we keep reading the Bible alone and with others, we will gradually begin to paint our soul with all of the beautiful colors of biblical faith. We will start using the

stories, the metaphors and the themes of Scripture as a kind of lens with which to see and interpret our own life. Some of us were taught to use a scientific lens or a business lens or a political lens. Some of us only had our family lens, with all of its dysfunction. All of these lenses are inadequate, if not downright dangerous. They don't let us recognize ourselves, let alone Jesus.

But again, the pre-Aldersgate Wesley knew Scripture better than he knew anything and he still didn't fully know his Savior. So there's something else that is needed. Each of us needs our own Aldersgate, our own personal encounter with the living Christ. I guess that's one of the reasons why I walk labyrinths. Before going to the Monet exhibit, I asked Hank to stop at Grace Cathedral so I could walk their outdoor labyrinth. I always choose a scripture to meditate on as I walk, and I meditated on this passage, asking myself what is keeping me from recognizing Jesus.

I was hoping that this would be my own little walk to Emmaus for the week, because there was that time back in 2009 when I was

meditating on a passage from Isaiah and Jesus appeared to me on the labyrinth. I guess you could call it a vision, and now every time I walk a labyrinth, I wonder if I'll see him again. But he didn't appear this time, or I didn't recognize him if he did.

In Luke, the disciples arrive in Emmaus still not knowing who this stranger is. But they want to hear more from him, so they beg him to stay for dinner. And it is in the ordinary act of breaking bread that the eyes of their hearts are finally opened. Do they see Jesus because that ordinary act makes them remember eating with Jesus? Do they have a flashback to the last supper or maybe the feeding of the 5,000? Or is this symbolic action not just pointing back in history but pointing forward to say something about the church's ministry? Think about it: The disciples studied the Scripture on the road and then broke bread with their Savior. Pastors are ordained to word and sacrament, preaching the word and breaking the bread. So is this Luke's way of saying that if we are seeking Jesus, we should all come to church on Communion Sundays?

I'd love it if everyone did, but I don't think so. We come to church not just because we are hoping to see Jesus on Sunday morning, but because we hope to learn how to recognize Jesus when we run into him the rest of the week. Coming home on Friday, I asked myself, where did I see Jesus this week? Not at the LDS temple. Not at the Greek Orthodox cathedral. Not at the Monet exhibit. Not on the labyrinth. All of our holy buildings, all of our holy pursuits like painting or labyrinth walking, are nothing more than human attempts to create something that will bring heaven down to earth or the divine into human life in some way. But Jesus has already done that for us.

Jesus came to put his whole being into our brokenness and maybe that's why he was known to the disciples in the breaking of the bread. When the bread was broken, they were confronted with their own brokenness, with their profound grief. That broken loaf was not just his broken body, but their broken hearts as well. And seeing their broken hearts held in his loving hands enabled them to

recognize him. But at the moment that they saw him, he disappeared from their sight. Their encounter with the living Lord lasted only an instant, but eternity was in it.

When was my heart burning within me this week? Or, in Wesley's words, when was my heart strangely warmed? It was when I had ten minutes before the Finance Committee was supposed to start and I thought about what I could get done in ten minutes. I decided to call Barbara Stone to check in on her husband, Bill. She told me that he had died just a few hours before. I had no idea, but something told me to pick up the phone. It was Jesus. When I got home from San Francisco, my heart was still burning. I called again and on the phone I "walked with her" as she shared what she has been feeling.

A few hours later, I got a text from my friend, Gayle, in Marin. One of my former parishioners whom I dearly love has been battling cancer. The news is not good. Gayle—who cared for her husband through a long and terminal illness, and then cared for her mother,

commuting to Red Bluff every week for months and months until her mom died, and then brought her husband's caregiver into her home when the caregiver had no other place to live, and who not long ago lost her cousin to cancer—is now caring for Martha whose cancer has metastasized. Martha has lived a long, faithful and fruitful life and she will be on her way home.

As my heart broke at the news, I recognized Jesus in the simple act of friends walking with each other through the hard times of life. We are all on this road and it is leading us to our own personal Aldersgate. In the meantime, we can be glad that we know this story and all the stories of Jesus to help us make sense of who we are, who Jesus is, and where we are going. Friends walking with friends is a testimony to the God who says: “And I will walk among you and be your God and you shall be my people.” [Leviticus 26:12] And even though we must walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for God is with us. [Psalm 23] In fact,

these were Wesley's last words and today they will be mine: "The best of all is, God is with us."