

“That is now a thing that has happened.” At least, that’s what I imagine myself saying if I had experienced Jesus’s appearance, and disappearance, on the road to Emmaus. Because while it’s clear that something remarkable had happened, at first blush, it’s hard to say that it accomplished anything. And I think that we are meant to imagine ourselves experiencing this story, or rather, that this story is meant to appeal to our imagination and pique our curiosity. I think that in part because St. Luke, uncharacteristically, does not tell us the name of one of the two disciples, inviting readers to put themselves in that disciple’s place, and in part because the story raises so many questions without giving us explicit answers.

The point of the story would seem to be in the concluding line, about how Jesus “had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.” And lots of sermons have been preached talking about how Jesus is made known to us in the Eucharist. But while I prize education, especially liturgical and theological education, the Eucharist isn’t primarily about knowledge, and I don’t think this story is primarily about the Eucharist.

While the story explicitly includes the so-called “fourfold action” of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving that is associated with the Eucharist, the setting is not that of a ritual. Rather, in this story, the phrase “the breaking of the bread” refers to an ordinary and customary act of hospitality. And perhaps more to the point, in this story, Jesus had shown an intention to part ways with the two disciples and keep walking, and then immediately disappears after giving them the bread. Whereas the whole point of the Eucharist is that Jesus sticks around in order to change Christians, *whether we understand or not*, rather than disappearing to teach us that it was really him. When it comes to the Eucharist, Episcopalians believe in the Real Presence, but what we just heard is a story of the Real Absence. In a sense.

Digging deeper into this story also helps us avoid mischaracterizing it as pure symbolism. While the location of Emmaus and the name of one disciple are unknown, St. Luke grounds the story in space and time, reconnecting the two disciples who encountered Jesus with the inner circle in Jerusalem, and setting this story explicitly on the first Easter Day. Luke even name-checks Simon, better known by his nickname Peter, and connects Peter to the risen Lord with his own resurrection encounter. So yes, all of us need to welcome Jesus so that he can open our hearts and minds, and lead us from despair to joy, that is not a wrong conclusion to draw from this story, but I also believe St. Luke related this story as an historical fact, not an allegory.

Another reason why I believe this is a true story is because it is so weird. Especially the bit about how “their eyes were kept from recognizing him,” and the consequences of that. I do not think Luke would make that up. But his use of the passive voice forces us to ask how or why “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” My first thought was that Jesus was playing a good-natured joke on them. I’m reminded of when I met one of my neighbors for the first time. I had already reported his car for encroaching into one of my parking spaces — just to ask the manager to ask whoever

parked there to be more careful, since the ownership of parking spaces is not published. A couple of weeks later I pulled into the other space when he was there, we greeted each other, and he remarked about how the owner of the space next to his had swiftly reported his minor incursion. I said, "Oh yeah, the guy who owns that spot is a real jerk." Of course he eventually figured it out, but more recently, I happily granted him permission for one of his guests to use the spot.

Which brings me to the role of hospitality and community in the Emmaus story. Jesus is a bit of a jerk to the two disciples at one point, calling them "foolish" and "slow of heart." But in all fairness, they had just asked Jesus, "Are you the only person who doesn't know what happened to Jesus?" Classic. They get past that, though; they remain in dialogue and warm up enough to Jesus to issue the invitation that in turn leads to their epiphany. The two had begun in grief and despair, which often make people close themselves off, but since they did not give in to that impulse, they laid the groundwork for their own uplifting. Yes, Jesus carried that out, but his inclination to keep going after the two had decided to stop indicates that while he did approach them in the first place, and was willing to chide them, he had no intention of forcing anything on them.

That's an important lesson for grieving people and those who care about them, but the broader implication is that the common expression of "seeing Jesus" is a bit misleading. I myself have spoken about the importance of seeing, or looking for, Jesus in ourselves, in others, and in the world more generally, but this story reminds us that "seeing Jesus" has at least as much to do with our attitude as it does with our perception.

We should be humbled by our realization that Jesus can be right in front of us, but we cannot perceive him, because we are too determined to persist in things that are mistaken, are not working, or are self-defeating. We all know people who would have tried to explain the Scriptures to their mysterious new companion, insisting that they were right and he was wrong, if they were not so wrapped up in their own narcissism that his chiding "offended" them and they rejected the conversation in the first place. At times, we can even be like that ourselves. Rather than Jesus playing a joke on us, we can keep ourselves from recognizing him, and when we do, the joke's still on us. We remain trapped in the web of despair, confusion, and isolation we wove for ourselves.

The bad news is that Jesus does not force himself on us even when it would be for our own good, unless your name is Saul and you've been persecuting Christians. The good news is that Jesus never gives up on us, meeting us where we are and walking with us, and not just once, but time and again. So, even when we do have the wrong attitude sometimes, it's OK. We will get our glimpse of Jesus at another place and time. And when that moment does come, we will be transformed, our despair to joy, our doubt to faith, our confusion to comprehension, our isolation to unity. We will be moved to share with our friends and neighbors the wonderful thing that has happened.