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Pilgrim United Church of Christ
Third Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2017

Scripture readings: [Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19](#) and [Luke 24:13-25](#)

A couple of years ago, I arrived at the Interfaith Hospitality Network house to pick up a family who needed a ride to Epworth UMC, around the corner from us, where they would be spending the night. Some folks in our church would be serving and sharing a meal with them there. When I walked up to the IHN house, I saw Karen Webbink, another Pilgrim who was giving a ride to a different family that evening.

When I shared that I was also there to drive a family, Karen looked at me strangely -- not unkindly because she's Karen -- and responded that there was someone else from our church coming to pick them up. For a second, I wondered if I had the wrong date (which I've been known to do), but as I watched her face I realized she didn't know who I was! (*No*, not because she hadn't been to church in a long time.)

I was coming from the downtown YMCA where I had just worked out; I didn't have glasses and my hair was pulled back. I said, "Karen, it's me -- Mandy. *I'm* supposed to pick up this famiy."

I don't know if it was my voice or the curls bursting out of the bun behind me, but suddenly her face registered recognition and she said, "Oh, *Mandy!*"

It's an interesting experience when someone you know doesn't recognize you -- or you don't recognize someone you know -- isn't it?

Sometimes it's because of the context: we're so used to seeing someone in a particular setting it can be hard to translate that connection without our typical context clues. Sometimes distinguishing features have changed. Sometimes something about us has changed: our associations, connections, memories. Sometimes it's just been a long time.

Who knows why the two on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Jesus after a few days. Maybe his curly hair had become straight. Maybe he'd pulled it back in a bun.

Maybe they were just so overcome by the events of the past three days: today's story occurs on Easter day, so a whole lot has happened between the Passover celebration and the crucifixion and burial. There was a lot to process and, from their perspectives, to mourn.

And who's to say Jesus didn't look radically different in some way after all of this. He was *resurrected*, not merely resuscitated, after all.¹ The point was never to be the same. He was not risen for the sake of the status quo.

Still, isn't it odd that two of Jesus' followers could walk with him -- for *miles*, presumably -- listening to him speak and not realize with whom they were?

Was it incredibly foggy? Did they forget their glasses in a rush to get on the road? Did Jesus talk like Batman?

In the gospel of John, we're told that Mary, weeping outside the empty tomb, mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener, but recognizes Jesus [as soon as he says her name](#).

Yet these two on their way to Emmaus listen to Jesus recount scripture from Moses "through all the prophets" and they don't realize who he is?

On the one hand, we are baffled by this profound disconnect.

On the other, we understand. Anyone who has been overwhelmed by shocking events -- distracted and exhausted by grief -- can understand how the two were trudging through a thick fog, regardless of actual weather.

One of the many compelling parts of Jewish tradition to me is *midrash*. Midrash sounds like an unfortunate medical situation, one that probably gets worse in warmer weather, but it is not: midrash is early rabbinic interpretation and commentary of biblical texts. Some might say it is reading between the lines of scripture.

Lawrence Kushner shares this ancient midrash of one of the greatest miracles in the Hebrew scriptures, the splitting of the Red Sea: according to Exodus, Moses held out his

¹ Marcus Borg elaborates on this point in *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*.

staff and the waters were parted, allowing the Israelites to cross before closing again on Pharaoh's army. According to the midrash:

[T]he bottom of the sea, though safe to walk on, was not completely dry but a little muddy, like a beach at low tide. [One Israelite,] Reuven, stepped into it and curled his lip. "What is this muck?"

[Another,] Shimon scowled, "There's mud all over the place!"

"This is just like the slime pits of Egypt!" replied Reuven.

"What's the difference?" complained Shimon. "Mud here, mud there; it's all the same."

And so it went for the two of them, grumbling all the way across the bottom of the sea. And, because they never once looked up, they never understood why on the distant shore everyone else was singing songs of praise. For Reuven and Shimon the miracle never happened.² (27)

For the two travelers in today's story, the miracle almost didn't happen.

All the way along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, did they never once look up? Were they so overcome by recent events that their eyes stayed buried in the ground?

They seem to have noticed when Jesus began walking ahead of them, as if continuing beyond Emmaus -- but that suggests they only saw him from behind.

We are told that their eyes were finally opened at the table, when Jesus *took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them*. Later, they told the others that *he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread*.

He had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

What was it about this moment that finally made them look -- and see?

I wonder if it was the smell -- and I don't mean the smell of having walked seven miles.

Was it the smell at the table -- the smell of the bread being broken apart and held out to them?

² Kushner, Lawrence. *God Was in This Place, & I, i Did Not Know: Finding Self, Spirituality, and Ultimate Meaning*. Jewish Lights: 2000.

Some of you probably saw [the video](#) going around recently of a man who had been in the hospital for weeks with complications from the flu. By the time he returned home, he looked so different -- had lost so much weight -- that his own dog didn't recognize him. The video shows the dog staying at a distance and barking suspiciously at the man, as the man tries to assure him with his voice. It is not until the dog smells his owner that he recognizes who he is. Sniffing him, the dog suddenly starts vigorously wagging his tail, repeatedly jumping up on the man and licking him.

Studies show that smell triggers more vivid memories than any other sense because the nerves that process smells pass from the nose through the amygdala and hippocampus, areas of the brain deeply involved in emotion and memory. Visual, auditory, and tactile information don't pass through these brain areas.

So maybe it was the smell, the particular and familiar aroma, that finally made the two remember, look up, *see*.

Maybe.

Maybe it was not the smell, but the *act that evoked* the smell -- the extra ordinary act of breaking bread -- that opened more than the travelers' eyes. The resonating ritual, as powerful as it is simple, we often remember and repeat.

In *The Meaning of Jesus*, Marcus Borg writes:

Most centrally, the story makes the claim that the risen Christ journeys with us, whether we know that or not, realize that or not, even as it affirms that there are moments of recognition in which we do realize that. I do not see the Emmaus Road story as reporting a particular event on a particular day, visible to anybody who happened to be there, but as a story about how the risen Christ comes to his followers again and again and again. (134-135)

On the one hand, we are baffled. On the other, we understand.

I am mindful, in this preaching moment, that it was not the long explanation, the careful interpretation of scripture that revealed to the travelers who Jesus was.

It was *the breaking of the bread*.

He had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

And so we break bread today, in this place,

to look up from the roads along which we have been trudging,

to see beyond the events that distract us, the events that overwhelm us,

to smell,

to taste,

to pay attention,

to the One who draws near.