

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2026
Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Luke 24:13-35

"Bringing Faith to Life"

A friend of mine who had been a career military officer told me this story about an Air Force major who exaggerated his own importance. This particular major was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and was assigned to a brand-new office. On his first morning behind the desk, an airman knocked on the door and asked to speak with the Colonel. Feeling the urge to impress the young airman, the Colonel picked up his phone and said, just as the airman entered his office: "Yes General, thank you, Sir. Yes I will pass that along to the President this afternoon. Yes, good-bye, Sir.

Then turning to the airman, he barked, "And what do you want?" "O nothing much, sir," replied the airman. "I'm just here to install your telephone." OOPS!

Not everything is what it seems to be. That is especially true of people. We have a tendency to put people we admire on a pedestal and then are discouraged when they fall off that pedestal. But the problem is not so much with people as it is with our expectations of people.

I hate to be the one to burst anyone's bubble, but as long as we put our trust and confidence in people that is the way things are going to turn out, because even the most perfect people among us are far from perfect. When we put our faith in a human being we will be disappointed, disheartened, dispirited, and disillusioned.

That's precisely what two disciples of Jesus were feeling on Easter day as they trudged from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were discouraged by the turn of events at the end of the previous week. Palm Sunday had gone so well and their expectations soared. But by Good Friday, their outlook was bleak. They were just certain that Jesus was the one who would rescue them. They were sure that he was the one who would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to her glory days. They were confident that he was their kind of Messiah. But who ever heard of a Messiah dying such a cruel and contemptible death? Messiah's were supposed to be perfect, but his death obviously proved that he wasn't their kind of perfect. He was like all the rest.

Just then, a stranger came up behind the two disciples and asked them what they were discussing. They were incredulous that anyone in Jerusalem hadn't heard of the events of the previous several days. So they began to relate the stories to the stranger, whom they did not recognize as Jesus, because, as scripture says, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him," which suggests that they were not looking at him the right way.

The duo even explained the events of that very morning when the women and other disciples reported an empty tomb. But they were still downcast because they just didn't get it. They were looking at everything wrong and as long as they looked at everything wrong, they would continue to experience disillusionment.

I was in college before I bought my first pair of glasses. I noticed one day in a huge chemistry class, that I couldn't read the blackboard. I kept asking my classmates to read what the professor was writing on it. Then it finally dawned on me that they could see it but I couldn't. It wasn't blurry to everybody, just to me. Once I got fitted for a pair of glasses and wore them to class, I was amazed at how much I could see. I had missed so much because my eyes were kept from seeing correctly. Well, the same thing was true of those two disciples. They had missed so much of the truth about Jesus because their eyes were kept from seeing correctly.

I remember my first day as a student at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. I arrived in the middle of the summer to take an intensive crash course in Greek (six hours per day, five days per week for eight weeks). I drove into the parking lot near the refectory (refectory sounds more cultured than "dining hall," but believe me, the food wasn't more cultured!). I wasn't quite sure where to go so when I saw the gardener working nearby, I asked him if he knew where the administration building was.

At first I wasn't sure if the gardener had heard me, or perhaps didn't understand. He was dressed pretty sloppily in khaki pants and shirt and was wearing a pith helmet, and I thought maybe he was a little slow, so I repeated my question being careful to enunciate each word so as to be clearly understood. This time, he nodded his head affirmatively, shuffled over toward a brick building, and motioned for me to follow him. Once inside, I found my way to the appropriate office and eventually settled into my dormitory.

The next day was the first day of class. After distributing the course description, exam schedule etc., the professor paused to introduce us to the Chairman of the Biblical Department, Dr. Stuart Currie.

Dr. Currie's reputation was legendary on the seminary campus. He spoke eight languages fluently and had memorized every verse of every hymn in the 1955 red Hymnbook. In attending chapel daily during my three years at Austin Seminary, I never once saw him use a hymnbook, and quite often would watch in amazement as Dr. Currie

sang a hymn from memory while reading a Greek New Testament. I looked forward to meeting this great man.

You cannot imagine my surprise to see the "gardener" come shuffling into the room! I was astounded and profoundly embarrassed. I felt so ashamed that I sought out Dr. Currie after class to apologize. He welcomed me into his office and as I stammered out my apology, a smile began to tug at the corners of his mouth.

He held up his hand and shook his head to assure me that he had taken no offense at my condescension. Then he said, "Actually, I don't mind being mistaken for a gardener. It puts me in pretty good company. Even Jesus was mistaken for a gardener. If the risen Lord didn't mind, who am I to take offense?"

When I encountered Dr. Currie, I saw him but failed to recognize him, because I wasn't expecting him to look so ordinary. Perhaps it was the same for those two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They saw Jesus, but they didn't recognize him because they weren't expecting him to be there at all.

Jesus had this way of confounding people's expectations. The people expected a political activist. What they got was a spiritual realist. The people expected a warrior-king. What they got was a servant-king. The people expected revenge on their enemies. What they got was a command to love their enemies. The people expected the comfortable to be afflicted. What they got was comfort for their afflictions.

What the people expected and what they got in Jesus Christ were two different things. That was true in his life. That was also true in his death. They didn't expect him to die. But once they accepted his death, they certainly didn't expect him to live again. Mistaken beliefs exert just as much influence as true beliefs, only they can have disastrous consequences.

A story in Russia is told about a railway employee accidentally locked himself in a refrigerator car. Unable to escape or attract attention he resigned himself to his fate. As he felt his body becoming numb he took a pencil out of his pocket and recorded the story of his approaching death. He scribbled on the boxcar wall: "I am becoming colder... still colder. Slowly freezing.... half asleep. These may be my last words."

And, indeed, they were, for when the boxcar was discovered and unlocked the man was dead. However, what the unfortunate man didn't know was that this particular boxcar had been sidetracked for repairs to the freezing mechanism. Inside the boxcar it was only 56 degrees, and there was plenty of available air. The man had died a victim of his own mistaken belief.

So it was for Cleopas and the other disciple. They were victimized by their own mistaken beliefs, which prevented them from recognizing the risen Lord. There are many people

today who are in a similar situation; whose disbeliefs hold them back from recognizing God's presence in their lives.

God doesn't always come to us with mesmerizing miraculous manifestations. Sometimes God chooses to slip up on us and casually join us in our ordinary routines. God can and does come to us when we least expect it; even in something as simple as a meal. But to recognize God, we have to break out of the shackles of our disbelief, which blind us to the presence of God. The unwillingness of the followers to believe that God could circumvent their expectations led them to become complacent in their faith.

When Jesus asked what they were discussing the disciples launched into a lengthy description of Jesus' life and death. They also mentioned, in passing, that they had heard two reports of Jesus' resurrection, but apparently they weren't convinced. Cleopas and the other disciple had the head-knowledge, but their hearts just weren't in it. And that was the trouble!

Today, there are many folks who could be described similarly: who can recite The Apostles' Creed, sing the Gloria Patri, and quote scripture by chapter and verse, but whose hearts are just not in it. God is not satisfied to have only our intellect. Jesus made that abundantly clear in reminding the disciples that the greatest commandment is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37)

In his encounter with these two disciples on their way to Emmaus, the risen Christ also reaffirmed that God doesn't want half-hearted disciples. When the two followers finished their lackluster litany, Jesus chastised them for their complacency: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declared."

We didn't hear any harsh words from Jesus when he confronted Thomas and his doubts. We heard only words of encouragement to Thomas and anyone who is wrestling with doubts. However, God apparently has less tolerance for apathy. Christianity is not for those who simply want to go through religious motions. The spiritual awakening of these disciples occurred not during Jesus' interpretation of scripture, but when he broke bread with them.

In an obvious allusion to the last supper, Jesus, "took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." Once again, Jesus revealed himself in the ordinary things of life. In doing so, Jesus demonstrated his eternal nature as our steadfast companion.

Whenever we feel lost, alone, and lifeless, we need to remember that Jesus is our constant companion. It was fascinating to discover in my research this week that the derivation of this word, "companion," lies in two Latin words which mean, "together," and "bread." Companionship comes when we break bread together.

In the moment of companionship with Jesus, these disciples with the anemic faith were infused with the spirit they needed to bring their faith to life. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Their head-knowledge of faith made sense only when their hearts were in it. Once their hearts were filled with enthusiasm and their minds were filled with understanding, their behavior followed along.

They couldn't wait to leave Emmaus, even though it was well after dark, and return to Jerusalem to share their news with the eleven disciples and the other followers. Their flagging spirits had gotten so fired up that it wouldn't surprise me if they ran all seven miles back to Jerusalem.

The risen Christ has that effect on people, straightening up sagging spirits, uplifting the downhearted, and invigorating the dispirited. These disciples went from being men who were "slow of heart," to being men whose "hearts burned" within them, all because Jesus gave them time and his personal presence.

This is the good news which we celebrate in our worship. In Jesus Christ, God has given us time and personal presence which can lead us out of complacency and into a vital, vibrant faith. Cleopas and the other disciple discovered that they couldn't separate life and faith.

Life and faith are not meant to be compartmentalized. Faith and life are intended to be interdependent. Life is renewed by faith. Faith is enlivened by life. Faith and life are inseparable. If we want to bring our faith to life, we have to bring our life to faith. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen