

Sermon: **UNSEEN COMPANION**

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Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

He asked them, "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. 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."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." 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; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then

they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

—Luke 24.13-35

Why is God so hard to see? I think that story strikes a nerve because we know what it's like to feel like we didn't see God. How often God was there and we just didn't notice. And sometimes we *wonder* if God is there because we sure don't see God. And sometimes we want to just cry out and say, "God why don't you just show yourself? Why don't you just come so we can see?" Why is God always trying to be invisible?

Well the problem is that God isn't trying to be invisible. The problem is that we don't know what we are looking for. So often, when we think we're looking for God what we're really looking for is kind of a cartoon character. We're looking for some guy in a long white robe and a deep voice— and that's not God.

Think of Mother Nature. You know we talk about Mother Nature but nobody actually expects to see some woman in a long flowing dress with stars and moons in her hair. We know that's just a figure of speech. When we say, "Mother Nature," we really just mean Nature. But we haven't yet figured out that when we say, "God," that's just a figure of speech. When we say, "Our Heavenly Father," what we mean is really Heaven. What we really mean is love. God is infinite. God is *not* a spirit, God is *Spirit*. God is personal, but God isn't a person. God isn't a human being because God isn't even a being. God *is* being.

That's what God says to Moses in the burning bush. "I am. I be. I am being." But we're looking for this little being, this little human that's an individual sort of guy with real human emotions. So it's hard for us to notice this infinite presence of love that gives rise to all creation, that is continually loving us into being, that is in everything and every moment.

Part of the difficulty too is that when we're looking for God we're specifically looking for somebody who will make things better. You know, when things are looking dicey and then they turn out okay how often we say, "Well phew, God was looking out for me," as if somehow there's this God who's looking out for one particular person who *didn't* have the accident. But what does that mean: was totally ignorant of somebody else who *did* have the accident? That God was watching over somebody who got better from cancer but ignored the person who didn't?

That's not really God. God is not somebody who just makes things better. God is the love that makes all things. And in all things love is there— it's just not a person. It's hard for us to get our heads around this, so we have to look for God in a completely new way. We have to look

for God with new eyes. This morning's gospel story suggests to us four different ways that we can practice looking for God with new eyes. There are four parts or scenes to this story, that have become the four acts of our worship this morning.

In the first act Jesus walks along with the disciples and says, "Tell me your story. What's going on?" And so with Jesus they reflect on their experience. The ancient Hebrews had this mind-blowing understanding unlike any other religion in the world: if we want to know God we can do that by reflecting together on our experience. Other traditions may have stories about gods doing *stuff*, but our story is *our* story. *We* were slaves in Egypt and here's what happened to *us*. *We* knew this guy named Jesus and here's what happened. *We experienced this*. We reflect together on our experience and when we do that, especially together, we see God in our lives in ways we didn't see while we were blowing our way through it. It's only when we stop and reflect that we begin to see how God has been in our life. We just didn't notice.

So it's only at the end of this story for instance when the disciples realize, "Oh Jesus was with us all along. We didn't realize because we were looking for something in particular—something else—and our minds weren't open enough."

Back in Montana I did a lot of church camps, high school summer camps and I can remember once on the shores of Flathead Lake in a cedar cabin with Vicky Weida doing our little circle of six or eight kids out of the hundreds that we had. We'd break them up into little bunches and one of the things that we always did sooner or later in our church camps was to ask the kids, "Tell us your story. Something about who you are what your life is all about and where do you see God in your life?"

As it goes around the circle they all have different stories and they see God in lots of different places. Most of them see God in sunsets, puppies and when things turn out okay. You know: they won the state championship, or the girlfriend that they kind of liked says that she likes them or whatever it is. And then it got around to this one kid who was not a churchgoer. We had a lot of those, kids who weren't religious, weren't churchgoers at all. They just came because somebody invited them. He came from a pretty rough life, pretty sandpapery kind of home life, not real nurturing and he had no religious background at all.

So he told us the story of *his* life in a sort of bare kind of way that a fifteen year old boy might. He didn't give much detail and then he sort of sighed and looked around and said, "Uh, I don't really, I don't see God in my life."

And Vicky said, "Well, you just told us your story. Were we listening to you?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess you were."

“Did you notice that while you were telling us your story?”

“No, I was just telling my story.”

“So you were telling your story and didn’t notice that we were all listening through that whole story. You know what else? You were *living* your whole story and didn’t even notice that God was listening to that whole thing all these years.”

And he puzzled over that for a second and then he sort of leaned forward and he said, “Really?”

And for a moment he began to see God in his life in a completely new way. Not the one who makes everything come out all right— because his life wasn’t coming out all that well—but the One who listens.

When we reflect on our experience we begin to see God in new ways. God is not just the one who makes it turn out okay in the end but the one who walks with us. After all, the disciples on their way to Emmaus had just gone through an experience that did not turn out alright. Their best friend and leader and spiritual teacher had just gotten executed and they were afraid for their lives... and then they realized that those awful times are when God *was* with them.

That’s the first scene. There’s a second part to the story. After they have reflected on their experience together, Jesus reflects on their experience in light of the scriptures. He goes back through all the scriptures and connects what they’ve experienced with what’s in scripture.

It’s surprising to me how many people really sincerely intend to be Christian and never read the Bible. They assume there’s nothing to be gained there. They think: “There’s all these old Bronze Age stories, but nothing about *my* life in the Bible that I would need to know.” But in fact the Bible is full of all these insights from all our elders who for thousands of years have been reflecting on their experience together and seeing God in their lives.

The people who don’t read the Bible are also seemingly the people who frequently say, “Well how come God never appears anymore?” And I want to say, “Because you don’t read the Bible. Read the Bible, you’ll start seeing God.”

Not in all the Bible; let’s be honest. There are parts of the Bible you that can read over and over and it will be pretty hard to find God. Like in the Book of Judges. It’s pretty hard without a lot of study and a lot of background. It’s hard to really connect deeply with God, reading nothing but the rules of how to build a tabernacle or the names of all the people that were assigned to the various priestly duties in the temple. Yeah, yeah, yeah, skip that part.

There are parts in the Bible that are profound in their ability to open our eyes to see God in our lives with the help of other people who've been doing that for thousands of years, who've been looking with open eyes.

Again, it helps to do it together. You can go off by yourself and read the Bible, but you're at the mercy of your own ignorance. When we're sharing together we hear one another's perspectives and we begin to see God in our lives in new ways.

Scene Three. There's a third part of the story, when they get to Emmaus they invite Jesus to stay with them. As they sit down to dinner Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. Then their eyes are opened.

From early on this four-fold act is sort of a liturgical formula that everybody recognized as "the Jesus thing." You take bread, you bless it, you break it, you give it. That's what Jesus does. And that's what we do every time we come to this table and we say this big long prayer and we bless the bread and we break it and then we share it with each other.

One of the ways to open our eyes to see God in our lives is in our worship. Believe it or not every part of our worship is prayer. Even the offering, even the announcements, even the mistakes, it's all the way in which the way we open ourselves to God's presence. It takes some intentionality: you have to be listening. If you're just sitting there deciding whether you like the music or agree with the sermon or are getting out on time you'll probably miss it. But if you're looking for God, if you're listening for the voice of God, something will open. You won't necessarily hear it in this hour. But you'll open yourself to it.

Prayer is like that. When you pray, you're not necessarily ever going to hear anything in your prayers. Prayer is simply practicing for listening all day long. So we come and we practice listening for the voice of God. Sometimes it's in words, maybe in the scriptures or the sermon. Sometimes it's in something more than words like the prayers. Sometimes there *are* no words, like in the bread. Like when the bells play: they don't even have words. We just listen... and we hear. In prayer we simply open our hearts for what God might have to say to us in new ways that we maybe haven't heard yet. We keep opening.

There's one more scene in the story, one more act in our worship. It's pretty short. It comes right at the end but it's so important. In the story the disciples at Emmaus realize they've seen the risen Christ, and they run back to Jerusalem and they tell the good news.

At the end of our worship we don't just say, "Okay, we're done now." We say, "On your mark, get set, go now." Now we're getting to the good part. We go out into the world and we serve. We tell the good news in words and deeds. We serve one another.

It's in serving sometimes that it finally becomes clear what God looks like. This is the part of our worship where I continually see what God looks like. It's the most wonderful experience. Every time we do communion you all come forward one by one, you hold out your empty hands, and I give you a piece of bread, and you get a little dip of grape juice. I know your stories. I know some of the things you struggle with and pray about and some of your victories and defeats and your concerns and your hopes and how beautiful every single person is and I think, "This is what God looks like." It's so cool.

Today I purposely haven't yet asked for enough people to help us serve communion. So we are going to have three extra spots today. I invite someone who's never served communion before to come help. And while you're here, look for God, because sometimes we see God most clearly when we are serving. Then we see.

In all these different ways—by reflecting on our experience, in conversation with scripture, in our prayer, in our worship, in serving in the church and out in the world—we open the eyes of our hearts and the ears of our hearts to see and hear the presence of God in brand new ways.

And we see so much more than just a guy in a robe who's going to make things better. We encounter the infinite, loving presence of the one whom, for lack of anything like a reasonable name, we shrug and call God, who's actually infinite and right here, right now.