

Resurrection Blindness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 April 2015

[0:00] There. Did you notice a little something in today's reading from Luke that the apostles did not quite recognize Jesus after he appeared to them when he rose from the dead. Listen again to the first part of that reading and I'm going to read it in such a way as to emphasize just a couple of parts of it.

It's from Luke chapter 24 and it begins I'll begin here with 36. As they were talking about these things Jesus himself stood among them and he said to them peace to you but they were startled and frightened as though they saw a spirit and he said to them why are you troubled and why do doubts arise in your hearts see my hands and my feet that it is I myself touch me and see for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have and when he had said this he showed them his hands and his feet and while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling he said to them have you anything here to eat he gave them a piece of broiled fish they gave him a piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate it before them. Now there are a lot of points in this gospel reading today that I could tease out of these few verses but I really only want to focus on one thing one theme the complete inability of the apostles to recognize Jesus when they looked straight at him. Three times in this short passage from Luke 24 36 to 43 the gospel writer noted that even with a direct one-on-one encounter with the resurrected

Jesus the apostles doubted that they were seeing him. Verse 37 reads but they were startled and frightened and thought it was a spirit. In verse 38 Jesus says to them why do doubts arise in your hearts and then in verse 41 Luke notes they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling. Three times in a very very short passage they're looking at him as close as is you and I are to one another but they don't quite recognize him recognize him or they sort of do. Why do the apostles not recognize Jesus or barely recognize him? How is this possible? Well this entire reading that I just read from Luke comes immediately after the account of the encounter of Jesus by two men on the road to Emmaus. If you look just before this reading in chapter 24 you'll see Luke 13 to 34 and it's too long for us to read here but I just want to focus on a couple of parts. I think you most people here know it pretty well. These two men there were two men going from Jerusalem to a little town of a little village of Emmaus about seven miles away from Jerusalem and it was on the day that Jesus rose from the dead. They apparently weren't the apostles but they were people close in the group and as they walked with one another suddenly Jesus appeared to them. So listen to Luke 24 beginning in verse 15. While they were talking and discussing together

Jesus himself drew near and went with them. Verse 16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him and he said to them. What is this conversation that you're holding with each other as you walk? And they stood still looking sad. Then one of them named Cleopas answered, Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there these days?

[4:09] Now I won't read the rest of the account. You can look at it on your own. But these two men spent several hours talking to Jesus. He kind of gave them a Bible study for a couple of hours as they were walking.

And yet until the end of the evening when they had a meal together in an inn where they were staying, they didn't know who this was. Jesus is talking about himself and the Messiah and they didn't know who he was.

Look at verse 25 there. And he said to them, O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them all the scriptures of the things concerning himself. But it was not until he broke the bread at the dinner that they knew it was Jesus.

Verse 30 and 31 go on. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them.

[5:21] And their eyes were opened and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. Same thing as with the apostles. In the first account that I read just after this, they didn't recognize him at first.

You would think that Luke in his gospel would want to emphasize how real Jesus was after his resurrection. Yet instead, he repeatedly talks about how his followers didn't recognize him. How odd. What's going on here? Luke's account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances are not unique in describing a Jesus who was not easily recognized by his disciples.

The Gospel of John has several accounts of people with Jesus after his crucifixion. And they didn't recognize him right away either. Turn to John 20, verse 11, and read with me the account of Mary Magdalene as she first sees Jesus at the tomb on the first Easter when they were there with the other women.

They went there to anoint Jesus' dead body with spices. So it begins in verse 11. John 20, verse 11. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

[6:41] And as she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting there where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

And they said to her, Woman, why are you weeping? And she told them, she said to them, They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have lain him. Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing.

But she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away. Jesus said to her, Mary.

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher. twice, here in verse 14 and again in verse 15, she looked straight at Jesus and did not know who he was.

[7:58] Later in chapter 21 of John's gospel, the same thing happens again. I'll start with verse 4 in chapter 21. Just as the day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore, yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to them, Children, do you have any fish? They're up in Galilee and Peter and the others decide to go fishing. I don't know what else to do, so they go fishing. Children, do you have any fish?

And they answered him, No. And he said to them, Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some. So they cast it and now they were not able to haul it in because of the quantity of fish.

That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, It is the Lord. When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work and threw himself into the sea.

The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire in place with fish laid out on it and bread.

[9:12] And Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish that you have just caught. So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore full of fish, 153 of them.

And there were so many that the net was not, yet the net was not torn. And Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. Now none of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you?

They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so were the fish. Now this was the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

This entire account shows how hard it was for the disciples to recognize Jesus even after they knew it was him. Verse 4 says this explicitly when John says, Jesus stood on the shore, yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

John writes in verse 12, Now none of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. So John says, they knew it was him, but they didn't ask him, Who are you?

[10:25] There must have been something there that they couldn't quite identify him, but sort of could. There was the chance, the possibility, that they could doubt him.

And recall that later in the same scripture, verse 14, John points out, and I'll quote this, This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

So even after multiple appearances, it was still possible for the disciples to have difficulty recognizing Jesus. What is going on here?

Matthew's gospel does the same thing. He likewise talks about doubt in the face of the resurrected Jesus. Matthew 28, 16, and 17. If you want to flip to that.

Matthew 28, 16, and 17. Right at the end of the gospel of Matthew. Matthew. Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee. Remember, there's one short for obvious reasons.

[11:33] To the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him. But some doubted. Now we don't know who that some was.

Was it the eleven or was it other people with them? But the point is, is that they saw him. He predicted that he was going to be there. They went to where he predicted.

They saw him. But some doubted. There was something that prevented some people from recognizing him. Clearly, this isn't just a random passage or two, but it's a consistent theme in the gospel accounts.

They see Jesus after his resurrection, but don't quite recognize him. What's going on? The same thing happens in some other places in the New Testament, apart from in the gospels.

Look at Acts. Acts 1, verse 3. When Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection, it says, and I'll quote this, verse 3, he presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs.

[12:46] Those are the three words I want to focus on. Appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God. Jesus somehow had to show them many proofs for them to believe in his resurrection.

For some reason, even in his presence, it wasn't immediately obvious. What's the message here in this? It's as if the Holy Spirit in the scriptures is emphasizing how difficult it was for people to identify the risen Lord.

Why is this? Well, it turns out that this subtlety in discerning God is not unique to the New Testament and the accounts of the post-resurrection Jesus.

Let's look at some Old Testament scriptures where people encounter God. Go back to the book of Genesis, chapter, I think it's 18, where Abraham has an encounter with God when it says, the Lord appeared to him by the oaks at Mamre as he sat by the door of his tent in the heat of the day.

He lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, O Lord, and then it goes on, there's a conversation with him.

[14:11] Initially, all Abraham saw were three guys and yet somehow during the course of that, it was revealed that this was God present with him but he doesn't see it at first.

Most all of you know the account of Moses and the burning bush. It's in Exodus 3, chapter 1. Let me read a little of that and just focus on something. Exodus 3, 1.

Now Moses was keeping his flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian and he had led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush. He looked and behold, the bush was burning yet it was not consumed.

And Moses said, I will turn aside to see this great sight why the bush is not burned. The point is is that when Moses first looked at God, he didn't see God.

[15:19] He saw a cool phenomenon, a bush that is on fire but wasn't consumed. He must have looked at it long enough to have seen that the bush wasn't being burned up.

And he says, I've got to go and check this thing out. He looked straight in the eye, so to speak, of God and didn't see God. Joshua, Moses' successor, had an encounter with God which does the same sort of thing.

It's contained in Joshua 5, verses 13-15. And here, after Joshua has been conquering stuff in the Holy Land, it begins, when Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, a man was standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand.

And Joshua went to him, so he goes up to the sky and he said to him, are you for us or for our adversaries? He says, are you on our side? Are you on the side of the people that we're trying to kill here?

And he said to him, no, but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Lord, now I have come.

And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped and said to him, what does my Lord say to his servant?

[16 : 38] And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, take off your sandals from your feet for the place where you are standing is holy. And Joshua did so. Once again, he encounters God in some manner, but he just sees a guy at first.

It isn't until there's some further revelation that he really understands. And there are other accounts of people seeing God yet not recognize him right away. Gideon in Judges, I won't read that, but Gideon in Judges 6 verses 11 through 24 encounters God, but he doesn't identify him as God until God disappears.

And then he realizes who he was with. The same is true of Manoah and his barren wife in Judges 13. They encounter the angel of the Lord.

They have a lot of interaction with him and it isn't until he departs that they realize that it was God and after he leaves, his barren wife conceives a son and Samson's born.

One of the ones I like the best is 1 Samuel 3, 1 through 10. And once again, I'm not going to read that, but that's this account that many of you are very familiar with. The young Samuel is there in the tabernacle at Shiloh.

[17 : 57] He is learning from Eli, the priest, the old guy, the priest, and he's apparently sleeping in the tabernacle and God calls to him three times and he calls out his name, Samuel, Samuel.

And each time, Samuel runs to Eli and says, you called me. Nah, I didn't call you. Go back to sleep. He keeps doing this a couple times. Finally, Eli figures out what's going on and he says, when he calls you again, say, speak, Lord, for your servant hears.

And it's at that point he then knows that he is in God's presence. But he didn't know that at first. There are plenty more passages. I'm not going to go through all of them. I'd be standing here for an hour reading passage after passage after passage where people encounter God, but they don't recognize him.

How about the basic message of Jesus himself? It took quite a while for his disciples to see that Jesus was more than just a man. And they had him daily teaching them.

It was halfway through Jesus' ministry before Peter correctly even identified him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Messiah.

[19 : 13] And it was not until the resurrection and the appearances afterwards that anyone directly called Jesus God. And it was then, remember, I think it was last week's reading, when the Apostle Thomas said, my Lord and my God.

It's apparently a pattern of God's revelation all throughout the Scripture when people encounter him, they have difficulty discerning that God is present to them.

So, okay, what do we make of all this? I've recited a lot of these Scriptures. What do we do about it? Well, three things. Three things.

The first thing is do not be disappointed or discouraged that God is not more obvious to us than he is. It is a historical pattern.

The Lord apparently wants us to struggle with the fact that he is not immediately and obviously there. There's nothing weird, crazy, or unusual about that.

[20 : 20] That's God's pattern for how he has revealed himself, not just in the post-resurrection accounts, but throughout all of the Bible. When Jesus spoke to the crowds, he often told parables to get the message across rather than hitting them over the head with the message directly.

There's a passage in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 4, where Jesus quotes Isaiah, chapter 6, 9 and 10. And in Mark 4, I'll read a little bit out of Mark 4, beginning with verse 10.

When he was, he'd just been telling some parables to the crowds, and then he, after that, he goes down the beach somewhere, I guess, and the apostles or the people who will later be the apostles, chase him down.

And here's the account. When he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, may indeed hear but not understand.

That's that quote from Isaiah, lest they should turn and be forgiven. And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?

[21 : 43] So the first lesson is this elusiveness of God, is that people seeking him struggle to experience him. So don't be discouraged if you don't immediately see God present.

That's the way he reveals himself. If anything, he is elusive and subtle. But the second point, right behind that, is don't be passive and assume that God will just come to you.

Work to find his presence in your life. Isaiah 55, 6 says, Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.

If you do not seek God, you will not likely find him. He will not likely hit you over the head with himself. Keep in mind, the people in Jerusalem and in Galilee in Jesus' day, how many times do you ever say, Oh, if only I lived in those days and I could see Jesus in the flesh and I could follow him around and whatnot.

But keep in mind, a lot of the people in Jerusalem and Galilee who were not seeking out the resurrected Jesus didn't really encounter him, even if they met him.

[23:09] They may have heard about him. They may have heard him speak at one time or another before his death. Maybe they were in the streets of Jerusalem that Easter time, that Passover time, when he was paraded through the streets and crucified.

But they never had any meaningful encounter with him. They just had a passive encounter. Quite frankly, we are at risk of the same sort of thing.

It is very easy in the church, and I mean here, to have a passive encounter with God which does nothing for you.

Keep in mind that Jesus is never looking for that in his disciples. He is not looking. He is looking for commitment. He is looking for disciples who hear him, who don't disperse with most of the crowd and go on with their lives after they've heard his really, really impressive talk.

And I'm sure there were great talks. But most of the people headed off. But a few of them went down the shore and said, what's that parable mean? He's looking for people who follow him down the shore and ask him about those cryptic parables.

[24:32] God does not care if you are a believer. He wants you to be a follower. To encounter God, you have to look for him.

If there is any message in the scriptures, it is that God speaks to his people, but that you need ears in order to hear him. At the end of telling some parables, Jesus said to the assembled crowd, and this is, once again, out of Mark 4, verse 9, he who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Now they all had ears, but who really heard? We need to actively seek God in order to hear what he is saying to us. Okay, from a practical standpoint, what are you supposed to do?

What do you do? Well, a couple things. Read the scriptures every single day. Get some kind of a system to do this.

Don't just crack your Bible open and read randomly. Once in a while, that's okay, but have a system to read the scriptures and do it every single day. There's a lot of programs.

[25:40] I happen to like the lectionary that's in the back of the prayer book. It's a daily lectionary. It's on a two-year cycle. There are a lot of cell phone and computer things.

You can find pamphlets, but whatever you do, find some systematic way to read the scriptures and follow it. Do that every single day.

Second point for what to do to how to reach out to God. Daily prayer time. God wants us to talk to Him and to listen to Him.

You need to do it. Reading the Bible is great and it's necessary and fine, but spend time focused on God in prayer.

Ask Him. Beg from Him. Pour out your soul to Him. The good, the bad, the ugly, whatever it is that you're going through. Thank Him and praise Him.

[26:37] I use the Psalms as a prayer guide and I also use the morning prayer service in the prayer book what we're patterning after this morning. You brush your teeth every morning and you take a shower every morning and you eat so that you're not hungry.

Do you pray every day? Which is more important, taking care of your body or taking care of your soul? Third thing that you can use to help you get close to God.

Get a partner to help you. Remember how Jesus sent out His disciples out in pairs to preach and cast out demons? There's a funny spiritual truth.

It's not written in the scripture as such, but it's very true. Lone Rangers get shot down in the spiritual world real fast. Get a partner to work with you in your spiritual life.

And I don't mean a friend who's a Christian. We all have Christian friends, but whom you never talk with about anything having to do with God. You just do stuff together. That's fine.

[27:43] Nothing wrong with that. I mean somebody who will share himself or herself with you about the texture and the contour of their interactions with God or their struggle to hear God and who you regularly share the same sorts of things with.

It could be your spouse. It could be a friend. It could be a mentor. You've got to have somebody. Remember how Jesus sent out the apostles to heal and cast out demons?

He sent them out in pairs because they needed one another as they did this. And it's fair to say that we are not stronger than the apostles. Get a partner or two who's a Christian and with whom you can regularly share the struggles of your faith.

So, third thing, and this is back to my original why is what do we make of this elusiveness of Jesus and of God.

Ask God to reveal himself to you. He will do it. If this God that we talk about so much is real, he will reveal himself.

[29:03] Look at Luke chapter 18. This is a parable that he told. This may be appropriate that I retell a parable because they're a little bit secretive.

But he taught that way. He told this in chapter 18. Here I'm reading just the beginning there. And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

He said, In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, Give me justice against my adversary. For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night?

[30:06] Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

He's asking about us. Will he find faith in us? The point is, God wants us to persistently ask him for his presence in our lives.

He is subtle on purpose because it allows us to tune our voice, to tune in his voice in such a way that would not otherwise be possible.

You know, when a teacher tries to teach something, it's not uncommon that they just don't tell the student explicitly. They somehow tease it and make them think it through.

You'll learn better that way. God's apparently wanting us to petition him so that he can reveal himself to us. He wants that. As you pray for God's presence in your life, you'll start to see those little coincidences which you will learn are not coincidences at all.

[31:18] They're instances of God acting. This idea that God is subtle and needs to be sought out rather than hitting us over the heads is so important that even in Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, intentionally, God leaves open the possibility that people would disbelieve.

He did this because it's in the nature of how He works. If He were more obvious, it would give us no chance to exercise faith to follow God.

Now, what faith is and why it's so important, that's a topic for another sermon another day. One of my favorite scriptures for this is the end of Psalm 77.

It's a very subtle little hint. In the end of Psalm 77, there's a passage that talks about Israel coming out and crossing the Red Sea.

Pick it up with verse 16. When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid. Indeed, the deep trembled.

[32:34] The clouds poured out water. The skies gave forth thunder. Your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind. Your lightnings lighted up the world.

The earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea. Your path through the great waters. But here's the last line.

Yet your footprints were unseen. seen. In other words, even with all of the great miracles God did, people could look and say, oh, there's no God there.

God did great things for Israel in leading them out of slavery. There were mighty miracles, and yet his footprints were unseen, says the psalmist. even with great miracles, he did not appear in a visible way and speak so that it's impossible to doubt that he was there.

Why? Because that's the way God works. He did that in the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. He did that in the Old Testament. He's doing that right now.

[33:44] So, to recap, why is this? Don't be disappointed or discouraged that God is not more obvious to you than he is.

It's his historical pattern. He wants us to struggle with the fact that he's not immediately and obviously there. Yet, don't be passive and assume that God will just come to you.

Work to find his presence in your life. You do it through scripture reading, through daily prayer time, and through getting a partner to help you. And finally, beg, call to him, ask him to reveal himself to you.

Unless this is some grand fairy tale that we're all deluding ourselves with, this God will do just that. And it's no fairy tale. Let's pray.