<Acts 2:36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Luke 24:13-35>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

It may not surprise you to learn that, when I was younger, I enjoyed reading comic books and following some of the superhero storylines. And when I say, “when I was younger,” that could could include any timeframe up until lsat week. And while I always enjoyed the artistry and the fun of the story, there is one criticism that I’ve never been able to get past: that an entire population could overlook the similarities between Superman and Clark Kent because Clark Kent wears glasses and Superman doesn’t.

And yes, in the grand and even minor scheme of the world, this is one of the smallest and most minor of quibbles. But, it’s there. With glasses on, he is Clark Kent and nothing more; without the glasses, clearly he’s Superman. And I bring it up this morning because, in reading Luke’s gospel today, it’s the first thing that I think of: that the disciples on the road to Emmaus can’t recognize Jesus, even when he’s explaining to them the fullness of God’s story, the fullness of his story.

Usually this reading comes on the Sunday following Easter, the Sunday when I am typically on vacation and so it’s rare that I get to engage this text and preach on it. And part of me wants to draw our attention to what happens on the road while these two disciples - Cleopas and one other - walk along, sad and grieving over the events and the news of the past days. The events of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, and of his crucifixion, death, and burial. And then the news of that very morning, from the women and then other disciples that the tomb was, indeed, empty. Cleopas and his companion bear all of this as they walk along, and they are indeed sad, grieving, and uncertain. We are not told why these two chose not to remain in Jerusalem with the other disciples, but perhaps they were returning to their home in Emmaus to regroup, process, and figure out what to do in the next days. Any of us who have experienced acute grief can recognize such a state of uncertainty about what will happen next, or how life will just “continue on.”

But here are these two, walking along the road, and unbeknownst to them Jesus appears and walks along with them.

I want to imagine, for a moment, how Jesus might have been approaching this encounter. Perhaps he expected Cleopas and this other disciple to recognize him, to perhaps be momentarily confused and caught off-guard, but then to recognize him once more and rejoice. But they don’t. Much like everyone who works at The Daily Planet, no one recognizes Superman when they look at Clark Kent.

Where do we encounter Jesus today, and not recognize him?

I realize that’s a loaded question; if we knew and recognized Jesus in our encounters, then it wouldn’t be a question at all. So, I suppose, the answer is that we potentially

encounter Jesus anywhere and everywhere, and the real question is how we behave when we encounter him. But let’s return to the two disciples. As the now-three of them journey along, Jesus continues to teach and interpret the Scriptures for them. All of the Scriptures, which likely takes all of the time during which they would be walking several miles to reach Emmaus. And while they won’t admit this to each other until later in our gospel reading, throughout this time of elucidation and instruction, their hearts burn within them, as if being stoked and fed for what new thing will be forged from them. Even if their eyes and their minds did not recognize Christ, their hearts did.

In his beloved story *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery introduced us to the phrase, “it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” Here in Luke’s gospel we see such a phrase lived out. And as much as it is important to be reminded to listen with our hearts and listen to our hearts, which can help us to understand much that our minds may not always be able to explain, there is still more to this story which calls our attention.

Eventually Jesus and the disciples reach Emmaus and Jesus, giving the impression that he was going to continue along the road, is invited in by the disciples. There, in sharing a meal, the disciples finally recognize Jesus as he breaks bread; in the now familiarity of this action, their eyes are opened and their minds comprehend what their hearts have been telling them along. And here is where we truly engage the question of “what do we do when we realize that we are encountering the risen Christ?” And the answer is, simply, to go back out.

For as much as there are notable and profound moments filling this story, it is notable for us in this Easter season that Cleopas and his companion, upon encountering and recognizing Jesus - affirming the news of the women and then the other disciples - upon this encounter and recognition they themselves immediately leave. Jesus vanishes from their sight, and according to Luke the two “got up and returned to Jerusalem.”

They had just journeyed seven miles, and then reached Emmaus when it was almost evening, prompting them to invite Jesus to stay with them. And now, “within the hour,” they are on the road again, returning to Jerusalem, traveling - running - the seven miles back to the other disciples. Their response to this encounter with Jesus is to have their faith restored and then to take the good news with them out into the world.

Their witness in this event would eventually lead Peter to what would become the cornerstone sermon of the early church, that day of Pentecost of which we also began to look at this morning. The witness of Cleopas and this other disciple, when added to the encounters and experiences of Peter, is what will lead to this sermon and the seed of the early church which will begin to take root, transforming not just these few but the entire world, across time and space. How did these disciples respond? By going out in the fullness of the good news, with their depth of faith leading them.

They did not sit. They did not rest for the night with the promise that they would return in the morning when it was cool and they were refreshed. They immediately got up and returned to the others, to bear witness together and for one another.

On the road, *again* - after a walk with Jesus, taking a good portion of the day and many miles, and then stopping at the house for a meal, the disciples then leave and run the same route BACK to Jerusalem and the other disciples. They receive and then they go: faith and deed. After the encounter with Jesus, during which their hearts burned within them even if they didn’t recognize him, they realize that they cannot remain where they are, physically or spiritually. They have been changed, and in their transformation, in their encounter with the Risen Lord, they know that their response is to go out and share the good news. To go out and proclaim the gospel. To go out and reconnect with others in need of hope.

So, too, is our call in this Easter season.

Our eyes may not always recognize Jesus in those whom we encounter. Like all those citizens of Metropolis, we may see only Clark Kent standing in front of us, and not Superman. But that is actually secondary. For we have encountered the Risen Lord; the fact that we are here, that we continue to gather with each other each week bears the truth of this, and our hearts know it. Our call is not to just sit back in faith but to go out in proclamation.

How will you respond to encountering, with or without recognition, our Risen Lord in our lives? How will you find your faith restored, and in that, how will you then go out in deed to proclaim the good news? This is our Easter invitation. This is what led Peter to preach his sermon and invites the Spirit to step in and take root in our world. This is what transforms our lives: the going out in faith and in good news. May you be an Easter people. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)