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**“And They Recognized Him”  
Luke 24:13-35**

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Have you ever noticed how we behave differently in churches than we do in our regular lives. To give you an example, just this past Palm Sunday, I took the high school youth on a field trip to an old Episcopal church in Greenville. It had high ceilings and arched windows and stained glass. And we all noticed that the minute we walked inside the church, everyone got quiet. The space itself caused us to pause. Our eyes were directed forward to the shrouded cross and we took our seats in silence.

Maybe, on some level, we feel the nearer presence of God in these spaces. After all, church is God’s house, isn’t it? This is the place where we come to encounter God – to worship God. And we offer the presence of God our respect when we come here. We dress in our Sunday best. We use our very best manners... or at least we try to. Something about this space makes us aware of the watchful eye of God, doesn’t it? It seems to be a holy place. A place set apart.

And indeed, it is set apart. Our own Presbyterian constitution says so in the Second Helvetic Confession. If you’ve got your book of Confessions with you, feel free to follow along. It says,

*“places dedicated to God and his worship are not profane, but holy, and... those who are present in them are to conduct themselves reverently and modestly, seeing that they are in a sacred place, in the presence of God and his holy angels.”<sup>1</sup>*

So, yes, it’s right to treat sacred space with reverence - because we come here to worship a holy God. I’m certainly not suggesting that we stop showing reverence in these spaces. But what’s the flipside of that reverent feeling? If church is sacred space, then what does that mean about all the other spaces we inhabit? If church is where we look to find the nearer presence of God, then what does that say about God’s presence outside the spaces we deem to be sacred. Perhaps one unintended consequence of that kind of attitude is that we begin to believe that we can leave God in those sacred spaces. We begin to behave as if God is confined to certain places, and outside those places, we don’t need to worry much about him or what he’s doing in the world. God is in charge of the sacred, and we’re in charge of everything else.

This is not a new phenomenon, of course. Believers throughout the ages have had nice places to put God. The Ark of the Covenant was the place where God could be found in the time of Moses. The Temple of Solomon was where God stayed during the days of the kingdom of Israel. And after the temple was destroyed, the people of God looked to find him in the word of

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<sup>1</sup> (The Office of the General Assembly, 2016) - 5.125

the Law, as if he could be confined there. And the church throughout the ages has sought to pin him down with councils and creeds and confessions. Nice stuff, to be sure... you could even say these things are sacred, but could they really be said to contain the God of the universe? Of course not. The whole notion of putting limits on God flies in the face of the very idea of God. I recognize the irony, but here's another citation from the Book of Confessions for you. It comes from question seven of the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards for those of you following along. It asks,

*Q. 7. What is God?*

*A. God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection, all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.*<sup>2</sup>

If we take this definition to be true, and we say that God is infinite in being and that God is present everywhere, then certainly we're also saying that God exists outside those so-called sacred spaces. Why, then, do we act like the opposite is true? Why do we seemingly leave him at the door of the church? Well, to put it plainly, we leave him locked away in sacred spaces because our sin has conditioned us to believe that's where he belongs. He's up there, and we're down here. That's just the way things have to be.

On that first Easter evening so many years ago, two disciples were walking away from Jerusalem, which was the most sacred space of all. And they were leaving that sacred space feeling sad, because the God they expected to find there... well he wasn't there after all. So, with their heads hung low, they made their way to a village called Emmaus. And alongside them comes a stranger. A man who seems to have no idea about the events that had just taken place. And Cleopas, one of the disciples on the road, laments to this man that Jesus, whom they thought might be the messiah, was not all that they had hoped he would be. Cleopas says, "we had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel." And the subtext, of course, is that Jesus was not the one they had hoped for. Because he died. The messiah they expected was going to come down from on high with the mighty power of God to conquer Rome. The messiah they expected would be sacred; set apart. But this would-be messiah... this man named Jesus... well... he turned out to be just like them. Weak, mortal, and now he's dead.

And maybe we know what that's like. Because what do we expect from God? What is he like and where does he dwell? Well, it says a lot about our ideas of God in the ways we seek him out. One writer says,

*"We seek him exactly where he does not want to be found... We look above... to heaven far away... The real God, we think, is the far-off one at the top of that spiritual mountain, and if we cannot reach the top we can at least get closer. So we dream up rules by which God will be more present if we do the right things, worship with the right feeling, or go to the right place."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> (The Office of the General Assembly, 2016) - 7.117

<sup>3</sup> (Morton, 2024)

What does the God of the mountaintop want from us? If he thinks about us at all, then surely what he wants from us is perfection. He wants us to prove ourselves worthy of his concern. And what do we want from him? Surely what we want from him is that he should solve all our problems. That he should rain down blessings from on high but otherwise not get too involved. We like the God of the mountaintop because he's contained there in sacred space. We like the God of the mountaintop because we understand how he works. We put in our goodness, and out comes his blessing. Like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, we think that we have to earn our Father's love. We think we have to work for it. And, to be honest, we like it that way, because it makes sense to us. At least, that's what we think we want.

There's a story from the Old Testament of a time when that was not at all the kind of arrangement we had with God. This story comes from a time when God was intimately close. When God walked with human beings in a Garden in the cool of the day. Everything we needed from God, he provided. We did not know ourselves apart from God, for God was all that was, and God was all that we wanted. Everything was sacred.

But in that Garden was a tree whose fruit held the knowledge of good and evil. And with that knowledge we were tempted. We wanted that knowledge so that we could make the rules. And by the eating of that forbidden food, our eyes were opened. Genesis 3:6-7 says,

*"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. <sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked."<sup>4</sup>*

And with our eyes opened, we knew that things had changed. No longer would we walk with God in the cool of the day. By trying to take control, we had, in fact, separated ourselves from his presence. God became to us a far-off God. And we became a wandering people.

And it seemed, for a long time, that that was how it was always going to be. God over there... distant and aloof. While we remain down here, seeking him only where we think such a God can be found.

But then came a stranger, wandering, it seems, by himself. And two fellow travelers along the road invited the stranger to dinner because it was late in the evening and the daylight was beginning to fade. And somehow, the guest became the host. And when he took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

By the eating of one food, our eyes were opened to our sin but closed to God. By the eating of another, the curse of our blindness was undone. In the breaking of the bread, that is, in his dying on the cross, God once again opens our eyes to behold him standing there beside us, arms flung wide to embrace his beloved and wayward children.

You see, God loved us so much that he was never content to stay hidden away in sacred space. His will was always to come after us. Like a shepherd who searches for a lost sheep, or a

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:6-7

woman who searches for a lost coin, or a father whose eyes are always fixed on the horizon, searching for his lost son, God in Christ comes looking for us.

For he came not to be found but to find. Those disciples walking along the road thought they were alone, but God found them. Where they least expected him, there he always was. And by the power of his resurrection, God finds us too. In his love for us, we too are never alone. Like the father in the parable says to his wayward eldest son, so God says to each one of us, “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”<sup>5</sup> St. Augustine speaks of being found by God when he says,

*“Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the outside world and sought you there, ... You were with me, but I was not with you... You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”<sup>6</sup>*

The God of the mountaintop is not the God we meet in Jesus Christ. The God we meet in Jesus is the one who comes instead to find us. He finds us walking on the road and he finds us at the table. And there, our eyes he opens, and we recognize him. Thanks be to God.

## References

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 15:31

<sup>6</sup> (Augustine, 1961)