



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

June 16, 2013

"Seeing Jesus" - Luke 24:13-35 (Gospel of Luke Series)

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On the screen behind me is a picture of one of the instrument approach for Oakland International Airport in California. That's the kind of chart a pilot uses to find the runway when all they can see out the window are clouds.

Most of us have been in a commercial aircraft on final approach to an airport when all WE can see out the window are clouds and rain. I don't know whether you've ever wondered about this, or if you like to think about stuff like this, but have you ever had this thought? IF the view out the window of the cockpit is anything like the view out the window at my seat, how is the pilot going to find the runway? Ever thought about that?

Most of us have experienced a turbulent descent to the airport on a stormy day. Let's be honest, it can be a little unnerving. I'll admit it. I always say my prayers before every take off. And when we're descending through the clouds in a storm I do pray, sometimes, for the pilots. I'm hoping that the captain has brought her A-game to work and that she knows how to find the airport when the view out of the cockpit is completely obscured.

This approach plate is for the VOR Runway 9 Right approach. A chart like this graphically depicts the specific procedure a pilot needs to follow to land on runway 9 Right,

when they can't actually see the runway.

For the longest time, this approach plate was up on my refrigerator. I'm probably the only person here today who has had an instrument approach plate on their refrigerator. I may be wrong about that. I've met a number of pilots in the last two weeks. That approach plate was up on my refrigerator where I could see it every day because it reminds me of what the passage we're looking at today teaches me about following Christ. We'll talk about that in a minute.

I'm an instrument rated private pilot and I have flown this instrument approach to Oakland...and I've flown it in a storm. I have about 700 hours as pilot in command. I accumulated a lot of those hours by practicing instrument approaches on clear and calm days with a safety pilot on board. When you're practicing instrument approaches you need another pilot on board. You need an experienced pilot who is keeping an eye on what you're doing AND keeping an eye on what's going on outside the aircraft.

When pilots practice instrument approaches they often wear a hood on their head until they get to about 250 feet off the ground. With a hood on my head I can't see out the window. All I can see is the instrument panel. The

goal is to fly the approach, using only the instruments, and fly it all the way down to about 250 feet, pull off the hood, look up, and hopefully see the runway. That's the goal. And let me tell you, it is an awesome feeling to look up when you're just 250 feet off the ground and see a big long runway right in front of you—or maybe just off to the right or left a little if you didn't do it perfectly.

Let me also tell you, it's one thing to fly a practice approach on a clear day when at any minute I can say, "That's it. I've had enough," and pull off the hood and simply look out the window. It's a completely different experience when I actually have to fly an instrument approach in a real storm.

My good friend Jon Stairs, who is a Navy pilot, was on board with me the day I flew this approach to Oakland in a storm. This was my first real instrument approach. It was not a practice run. The air traffic controllers cleared me to fly towards the Sausalito VOR, which is a navigation beacon on the ground used by pilots to find their way. The Sausalito VOR has distance-measuring equipment on it. As we approached the VOR from the east, bouncing our way through the clouds and rain (did I tell you it was also at night? It wasn't just cloudy and rainy, it was dark), I watched the distance to the VOR decrease.

Fifteen miles...more turbulence. Ten miles...rain on the windshields. Five miles to the VOR...nothing but clouds out the window.

We were in contact with the air traffic controllers on the ground. I was working hard to stay focused and calm as I waited for it to be my turn to be cleared for the approach. I could feel my shirt getting wet from my sweat.

First it was United Airlines that was cleared for the approach on a nearby runway. "Hey what about me?" Then Southwest Airlines, then another United flight, then American. I checked the distance to the Sausalito VOR, three miles, one mile and then we were on top of the VOR. The VOR was directly below us. We were now flying away from the Sausalito VOR.

Another Southwest flight was cleared for the approach. I thought to myself, "Do I need to remind them that I'm still here? I know I'm just this little guy putzing along at 100 knots. I checked our distance from Sausalito and the numbers started getting bigger. Two miles, three miles. I turned to John and said, "I guess we're on our way to Honolulu." That was a prophetic statement!! In a matter of minutes we'd be over the Pacific Ocean. I'm not a huge fan of flying over large bodies of water when I can count the number of engines on my airplane with one finger. I'm not a big fan of that at all.

Finally, it was my turn and the air traffic controller cleared me for the approach. I was super happy when we popped out of the bottom of the cloud deck and there in front of us was this big, long, beautiful runway all lit up in lights. That whole experience was a clinic for me as a pilot and it was a clinic for me as a follower of Christ.

I've learned a lot of big life lessons from instrument flying. Here's the biggest one: Am I going to trust what the instruments are telling me when I can't see anything out the window except clouds and rain? On a stormy night, will I trust what the air traffic controllers are telling me to do? Would I trust them even when they're not talking to me? Would I trust that they have my best interests at heart? Would I trust that they had not forgotten about me? Would I be able to keep my anxious feelings in check as I bounced my way through the darkness? I was nervous. I wondered whether I really had what it would take to make it through this experience. There were moments when I wanted that experience to be over.

You don't have to be piloting your own aircraft in the middle of storm to know exactly what that experience feels like. All you need to do is to hit a difficult place in your marriage and wonder whether your relationship is going to survive. All you need to do is lose your job in the middle of the worst economic downturn since the great depression and you'll know exactly what that experience feels like. All you need to do is hit what feels like an impossible challenge with your boss and wonder how you're going to survive working for your employer. All you need to do is come back from a routine doctors appointment with an unexpected diagnosis. All you need to do is experience the death of someone you love to wonder whether you're going to make it through this experience in one piece. All you need to do is to be overwhelmed by the challenges facing poor families living on the streets of Honolulu, or out beyond Makaha, or see the pain in the lives of women in Eastern Congo who are caught up in a war for resources, or look at the life a child in the Philippines without a

Compassion sponsor. All you need to do is experience an addiction or become disillusioned about the career you've invested so much time and effort in, to know how challenging it can be to face the uncertainties of our lives.

Each of us knows what it's like to be tempted to give up, to allow our feelings of uncertainty and fear to take control. Each of us knows what it's like to be right on that edge, ready to throw in the towel. And at the same time, we all know what is like to realize that giving up is not an option. There is simply too much at stake.

The people we read about in this amazing story in Luke chapter 24 knew all about those feelings, because they went through an experience that shattered their hopes and dreams. Their world came crashing in on them and they were filled with fear.

In the disappointment and confusion of the hours following Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, two of his shell-shocked followers, one named Cleopas and the other, whose name we don't know, make their way out of the city of Jerusalem. Some think this unnamed companion might be Cleopas' wife, Mary. I like that possibility. Here they are, husband and wife, walking together trying to make sense out of what just happened. The hopes they'd once had for Jesus are now gone. They thought they were on the verge of national liberation. Finally, after years of oppression they would be free of their Roman overlords. What they got instead was a dead and defeated leader, or so they thought. The person they believed would restore the glory and power of Israel had been beaten up, people had spit on him, and he had been nailed to a cross as a criminal.

And now he lay dead and buried in a tomb. What happened? How did the work of this good man end in the silence of a grave?

At the beginning of this remarkable passage we have a vivid picture of what life can look like when we lose hope and specifically when we try to live our lives without the hope of a resurrection. How could the reaction of these two been any different from what we see here in Luke 24? Who could possibly have believed that anything good could come out of the disaster that fell upon Jesus? Who could blame these two for their reaction? Few, if any of us, would have entertained the possibility that Jesus was alive.

Sometimes, in the middle of the storms of our lives, this is the way many of us live our lives. It's understandable. When life comes crashing in on us, we can lose hope and live as if the bones of Jesus are moldering in some undiscovered grave in Israel, instead of living with confidence and courage, knowing that Jesus is alive and still at work. Let's look at Luke 24, verse 13.

It's the afternoon of that first Easter day and Jesus joins Cleopas and his companion on their journey from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. They don't recognize him. Maybe it was their grief and fear that prevented them from recognizing him. Grief and sorrow and fear can keep us from seeing that Jesus is indeed with us.

As they walk along, Jesus simply asks them a question. "What are you talking about?" Cleopas and his companion stop to answer his question. The look on their faces and the way Cleopas responds to his question betrays his true feelings. This is what it looks like when we have lost hope, when we've given absolute authority to

our present circumstances. This is what it looks like when we no longer trust that things are not ONLY as they seem. Our circumstances are real but the gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that things are not ONLY as they seem.

The Greek word translated "sad" in verse 17 is the compound word "skuthropos". "Skuthros" means "sullen". When it's combined with the word for "eye", as it is in this word, it means to have a gloomy appearance. I don't think the word "sad" captures the meaning of the word "skuthropos." To be sullen includes the possibility of being "irritated". It's means to be in a bad mood. At times, I was sullen as a junior high school student when my parents asked me a question I thought was too stupid to answer.

Cleopas is irritated. He may be on edge because he's wondering whom he's talking with. Could this be a spy, trying to smoke out other followers of Jesus? Cleopas feels the same way about Jesus' question that I sometimes felt about my parents' questions. So he fires off an edgy response that clearly shows that this ignorant stranger bugs him. "Hey, man! Where have you been the last few days? Are you the only person in Jerusalem who doesn't know what just happened?" Can you hear the anger and irritation in that response?

That's the response of a man whose worldview does not include the possibility that a dead man can climb out of his grave. If we believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and if we can hold on to that truth, it can change everything about the way we see our present circumstances! Cleopas and his companion have heard some strange news about an empty tomb but they clearly don't believe that these outlandish rumors will add up

to anything. They're not going to get their hopes up again. Having their hopes raised and crushed again is just too high a price to pay. Their world is shattered. They're caught up in a violent storm of disappointment. They're heartbroken and afraid. Because their worldview does not allow for the possibility of a dead man rising from the grave, they don't entertain the possibility that Jesus is standing right in front of them, asking them a question.

They can't see Jesus because they can't yet believe that a man could die and be resurrected. But there is another reason they don't recognize Jesus. They never really understood Jesus when He was alive because their expectations for Jesus were far too small. The best they could have imagined was political liberation. They were looking for some relief, a little assistance, a local change in their situation when what they needed was a full-scale emancipation.

They didn't recognize how great their need was. Political liberation would have been great, but to hope only for that betrays their inadequate understanding of how great their need actually was. They thought a change in political administrations would do the trick. As helpful as that would have been, their vision remains far too small, far too local, and far too self-focused. What they needed, and what the entire world needs, is to be released from the deep bondage all of us are in and that was what Jesus was doing for the world on the cross.

We're just like them. We come to church hoping for just a little relief from the challenges of our lives and that is understandable. But what Jesus came to do is to completely liberate people and transform the world and us.

Like Cleopas our best hopes are for a little peace and an improvement to our circumstances. We'd be happy with a little life tune-up. We don't understand how sweeping the change Jesus has in mind and has made possible. And because we don't, we have a difficult time seeing Him.

Their dilemma, and ours, is so vast and so profound that the Son of God had to die on a Roman cross in order to liberate us from the slavery we all are in. We will begin to recognize Jesus and understand what He's all about when we begin to accept that our need is vast. We are incapable of rescuing ourselves from this impossible dilemma.

What is so fascinating about this passage is that what we see happening along the road to Emmaus is exactly the way Jesus operates even today. Listen to what theologian NT Wright says about this passage: "It is both a wonderful, unique, spellbinding tale, and also a model for a great deal of what being a Christian, from that day to this, is all about. The slow, sad dismay at the failure of human hopes; the turning to someone who might or might not help; the discovery that in scripture, all unexpected, there lay keys which might unlock the central mysteries and enable us to find the truth; the sudden realization of Jesus himself, present with us, warming our hearts with his truth, showing us himself as bread is broken. This describes the experience of innumerable Christians, and indeed goes quite a long way to explaining what it is about Christianity that grasps us and holds us in the face of so much that is wrong with the world, with the church, and with ourselves."

What we see unfold along the road to Emmaus is exactly how God works in our lives today. Jesus joins

us, unannounced, along our journey through life. Jesus is at work in our lives and the lives of the people we know even before any of us are able to recognize that He is present. Right now, whether you know it or not, Jesus is with you right there in the middle of the storms of life, right there in the middle of the boredom of life, right there in the middle of your anxieties and fears, right there in the middle of your greatest mistakes and regrets. Jesus is walking alongside you and me.

The way that Jesus reveals Himself to Cleopas and his companion happens in two ways. This is exactly the way Jesus reveals Himself to people today. Jesus shows these two, as they walk along this road together, how all of Scripture is about Him. If we want to see Jesus, we will see Him as a part of a community committed to studying the Scriptures. If you're not studying the Scriptures with someone else or in a small group, we need to help you do that.

As they walked along, Jesus explained how every page of the Old Testament pointed to Him. And as that astounding fact began to take hold of Cleopas and his companion, their hearts began to burn with the passion of God's love, His grace and His mercy. They began to get it. The same thing can happen to you and me.

We don't have time to take a close look at Luke chapter 24 verses 28-35. I want to encourage you to read those verses this week. Their eyes were opened as they invited Jesus to share a meal with them. When He blessed and broke the bread, suddenly they realized whom He was. The breaking and blessing of the bread pointed back to the glory of what He'd accomplished for us and the world on the cross. When they saw Him break the bread, they were

reminded of what He had said to his inner circle of disciples during that last meal together. This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this, take this, and receive this, remembering that I love you this much. It was then that they realized who He actually was.

When I was flying that approach into Oakland on that stormy night there was one thing I could have taken greater comfort from, but didn't. I was so focused on what I thought I had to do to meet the challenges of flying through that storm that I forgot that the person sitting right next to me was a Navy pilot with thousands of hours of flying time as pilot in command. Sitting right next to me was an experienced aviator who had been in this exact situation many, many times before. In fact, he'd flown approaches that were far more challenging than this one. There was nothing to fear.

In those moments of uncertainty in our lives when our anxiety threatens to overwhelm us, we are invited to trust the One who loves us, who died to set us free and who is with us. Our needs are great. We cannot save ourselves. We don't have to. We have one who has done everything that needs to be done to make an unshakeable relationship with God possible. He loves you with a love that has no end. I want to invite you to see Jesus. He is alive and He is with you. Trust Him. Trust Him. Let's pray.

Note: The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw is an associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also found at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: fpchkoolau@gmail.com