

Rev. Heike Werder (Sunday after Easter)
Luke 24: 13-24, 28-31

Do we have Easteragnosia?

Meet BILL CHOISSER. Bill was 48 when he for the first time recognized himself. He was standing in his bathroom, looking in the mirror when it happened. A strand of hair fell down – he had been growing it out for the first time. The strand draped toward a nose. He understood that it was a nose, but then it hit him forcefully that it was his nose. He looked a little higher, stared into his own eyes, and saw ... himself.

For most of his childhood, Choisser thought he was normal. He just assumed that nobody saw faces. But slowly, it dawned on him that he was different. Other people recognized their mothers on the street. He did not. During the 1970s, as a small-town lawyer in the Illinois Ozarks, he struggled to convince clients that he was competent even though he couldn't find them in court. He never greeted the judges when he passed them on the street – everyone looked similarly blank to him – and he developed a reputation for arrogance. His father, also a lawyer, told him to pay more attention. His mother grew distant from him. He felt like he lived in a ghost world. Not being able to recognize his own face or the faces of anyone else left him feeling hollow but what could he do?

One day in 1979, he quit, left town, and set out to find a better way of being in the world. At 32, he headed west and landed a job as a number cruncher at a construction firm in San Francisco. He spent his days staring at formulas and did not have to talk to people very much, which was a good thing. He did not have to worry about meeting people that knew him. 1,500 miles between him and southern Illinois gave him a measure of freedom. He started to wear colorful bandannas, and he let his hair grow. When it got long enough, he found that it helped him see himself. Before that, he'd had to deduce his presence: I'm the only one in the room, so that must be me in the mirror. Now that he had long hair and a wild-looking scarf on his head, he could recognize his image. He felt the beginnings of an identity.

It gave him the confidence to start seeing doctors. He wanted to know if there was something wrong with his brain. His vision was fine, they told him – 20/20. One doctor suggested he might have emotional problems and referred him to a psychiatrist. In the medical literature, there were a few reports of head-injury and stroke victims who'd lost their ability to recognize faces. No one, as far as the doctors knew, had ever been born with the condition.

Conventional medicine, in other words, got him nowhere. So Choisser posted a message about his experiences on a Usenet group devoted to people with neurological problems.

His subject line was "Trouble Recognizing Faces." After a few months, in late 1996, he received a solitary reply. "Hello, Bill," the email began, "I read what you wrote, and I think I have what you have." (1)

What Bill is living with is called prosopagnosia (greek – prosopa –face, and agnosia – knowledge). And what made it even more interesting, especially for the researchers, is that there are people born with it and not too few. Research has shown that 1 in 50 people live with the condition. That is 50 million people in the US alone.

Research of the condition is still in its infancy. Harvard, of course, has a research site, and so does King's College in England, and the University in Muenster, Germany. Bad news is that there is no cure for the condition. But as the research continues, slowly people with the condition find each other and are able to share methods of coping with it.

So, I think you know where this intro is going: Were the disciples were afflicted with prosopagnosia? The risen Lord has joined Cleopas and friend on the road to Emmaus, but for some reason their eyes were kept from recognizing Jesus. Stopping, standing, looking sad – Cleopas said to the one who had joined them on the road, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place?" "What things," the stranger asked. "The things about Jesus of Nazareth..."

Don't you want to yell out to those two nitwits, "Hello, anybody home? He is standing right in front of you! What's wrong with you?" Why in the world can't they recognize him? The text does not say that Jesus is in disguise. It just says, "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him." How can this be?

Since you can't have temporary prosopagnosia, maybe, maybe, it is because Jesus is out of context. It happens to all of us. We see someone whose face we don't recognize because they are not in the place we normally see them. And when we finally place that face, its too late and we feel a little 'nitwitty' ourselves.

For the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus is out of context. They remember a crucified Jesus, the dead Jesus. They were not expecting a risen, living, breathing Christ walking beside them.

And as they walk, Cleopas and his friend tell Jesus all that had happen to their friend. And even with all the evidence that Jesus had been raised, all the pieces of the puzzle in place – we have the stone rolled away, an empty tomb, the words of angels, and Jesus own words, and now with risen Jesus right in front of them, we cannot recognize him. Maybe we would also just stand there – staring at a stranger, looking lost and sad. Well, maybe that is not so hard to imagine, is it?

There are many, maybe too many, of us who know what it is like to walk away from an Easter morning, the day of resurrection, sad and lost. Sure, Jesus had wonderful words for us about love and grace, forgiveness and new life. We too heard the words of angels. We too have the story of new life.

But all the excitement, the music, the smell of Easter lilies fade away all too quickly. All too fast are we propelled back into the real world – the hard, harsh realities of what we see and know. We have friends who suffer and die; we're overwhelmed by our worries and frustrations. We get easily angered by time lost, opportunities wasted. Bitter about what is and what should have been. Dreams of the perfect life, shattered. We just can't seem to put the pieces together. "We had hoped that he, Jesus, was going to be the one to redeem Israel," Cleopas and his friend said. We had hoped he would take care of all that hold us back from fully living life abundantly, gracefully, happy. We had hoped that he was the one to redeem ...us. We had such high hopes. How far away do we get from the good news of Easter before we stop on the road and look at each other and acknowledge the hypocrisy between what we say we believe (that Christ is risen – Joy!) and how we actually live it out (looked up in our lives). It seems that we too suffer from Easteragnosia, or Easterblindness, for we have a hard time recognizing the risen Christ ourselves.

And yet, it is not as hard as it seems. We don't have to do intellectual gymnastics to see and recognize the risen Christ. We do so anytime – anywhere –we feel God's closeness, God's presence – a care and concern for our lives that shows God's understanding of our humanness. We do so anytime – anywhere – when we're inspired to go and tell – go and do.

Jesus often comes to us as a stranger – when we least expect, in various guises, in numerous circumstances. Emmaus invites us to expect that intervention, to expect that God will indeed seek us and find us.

Emmaus challenges us to see that it isn't our unshakable faith or evidences of deep spirituality that connect us with the risen Christ; but rather in our openness to his presence, and in our response – in our smallest gestures of hospitality and friendship. Emmaus reminds us that this happens not necessarily in church, but in a very ordinary world – a world full of people, strangers, marked by human loss and human brokenness.

We come to know God more intimately when we invite God into our lives – as Cleopas and his friend did when they invited Jesus into their home for dinner that evening. But after we have made our invitation, a subtle reversal takes place when God moves from being our guest to being our host, just as Jesus did in this passage. They finally recognized the Christ, the risen Christ as he took bread, broke it and shared it with them. Can you imagine the emotions in that room? Hearts pounding, stomachs flip-flopping, tears of joy!

Their encounter with the risen Christ in the stranger caused them to return to Jerusalem at once to tell the other disciples. And even though we never hear of Cleopas and his friend again, it is safe to assume that their encounter with Jesus that night changed their lives forever.

Easter can be the same for us. It is more than a nice day with family and friends, more than an event in Jesus' career, more than something we merely believe and move on from; it is more than positive thinking.

Easter is about faith in a God who overcomes death, pain, betrayal, abandonment, fear, and evil, and about a God who shows us how to live the resurrection.

We live it by allowing it to make us new; by allowing it to transform us and take us beyond ourselves.

We live it by allowing it to help us discover our unique place in the world and our part in God's plan for all creation.

We live it by allowing it to open our eyes and recognize – perhaps seeing for the first time – what's going on around us.

We live it by recognizing Christ in the face of a stranger that we meet on our journey through life.

We live it by realizing that the risen Christ has walked beside us the whole time.

Amen.

1. The story about Bill Choisser came from www.wired.com, issue 14.11, November 2006.