

Say Anagnorisis!

March 31, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Luke 24: 13-36

Friends, turn to a neighbor and say Happy Easter! **Happy Easter!** Turn to another neighbor and say Alleluia! **Alleluia!** Now turn to a neighbor and say this word on our Easter banner! Say Anastasis! **Anastasis.** It's the Greek word for Resurrection, or "Rise Again". And I've got another word this morning. Anagnorisis (ana-ug-NOR-is-is). Sounds kinda like a dinosaur, right, kids? Anagnorisis! But according to one dictionary, "it's a moment of startling discovery that produces a change from ignorance to knowledge." Say Anagnorisis! **Anagnorisis.** It's actually a literary term describing the moment when a character has a sudden realization or *recognition*! It's one character's moment of recognition about another character's true identity or the true nature of their own circumstances! We see it in the story of Oedipus. It's all over Shakespeare and Hitchcock! It's the moment when Dorothy realizes that her ruby reds could have taken her back to Kansas the whole time when Harry Potter understands who Snape really is, or when Darth Vader says to Luke: "*I am your father!*" That's anagnorisis, a moment of profound, life-changing recognition, and there is a particularly poignant example in the scripture we just heard.

It was late in the day on that first Easter Sunday. We find them *going*! "Heaven knows where were [they] were going!"¹ We are told it's to a village called Emmaus, but to this day, scholars can't find it on a map. Its actual location is a bit of a mystery! Maybe it's as Frederick Beuchner once wrote: "Emmaus was no place in particular. They were just "seven miles distant from a situation that had become unbearable." Emmaus, it so happens, literally translates to "a warm spring." Maybe it was a place for them of some retreat or hoped for renewal, a temporary or permanent escape from the harsh realities they had just experienced. Or maybe they just lived there. I can't help but point out here that Cleopas's unidentified companion wasn't necessarily another dude, as we so often assume! It could easily have been a woman, maybe his mother, wife, or daughter, walking along that road with him. Despite what "the tradition" tells us, Jesus was always surrounded by women, and today is a day of days to celebrate that, for as the scripture reminds us, women were the first to witness the empty tomb.

Whoever and wherever it was, they were going! They were going along that hard, dusty road after a *rough* few days. [For those of you who consider yourself so-called "Good Friday Christians," this one's for you, and for all who feel we are living in a Good Friday world.] They were there two days later, processing their shock, holding the extremity of their grief and trauma, those sights and smells in their bodies. Even a 7-mile walk couldn't shake it, and we feel this in their jittery energy, in their response when they first encounter him. "What, are you the only one who hasn't heard what happened?" And yet, as one commentary put it: These two disciples "stand for any Christian who was (or is) confused about *what happened* to Jesus and about where they might find him now." They were sorely confused, their hearts still doused in sorrow and disappointment.

¹ Lyrics are from this song that the congregation had just learned to sing together: <https://thebirdsings.com/woyaya/>

Verse 21: “But we had hoped he would save us,” they tell the stranger they meet on their way. That line always gets me. “But we had hoped. Who among us hasn’t been there? But we had hoped for more time together. We had hoped we could work it out, if only for the kids. We had hoped for better test results, for better news. We had hoped for a ceasefire by now. We had hoped our candidate would win?” We know this feeling!

Back to the scripture, we are told they had heard the reports of the women about the empty tomb. But how confounding! What *had* happened? They couldn’t imagine it yet. And so, Christ appears as a stranger at first, unrecognizable. He meets them where they are, with questions and curiosity. And before their sorrow-blinded eyes, he starts breaking open the scriptures. They invite him to stay for a while. And then it happens, in the simple, daily act of breaking bread! The moment of recognition begins here. The **anagnorisis!** Their eyes are opened! Their hearts rekindled! In that powerfully embodied exchange of sharing a meal, they recognize him! He has risen, indeed! And a new way opens before them!

Before digging in further, we must notice what doesn’t happen here! Jesus, who has just been brutally tortured and executed by the State, does not appear with anger, resentment, or harsh judgment. He’s not pointing fingers at them or anyone. He doesn’t succumb to that habitual human instinct to project one’s trauma or “dirty pain” onto someone else. This is crucial! Instead, it’s questions, wondering, and presence. Instead, by rising, returning, and breaking bread with them, he breaks down that age-old pattern of retribution and vengeance. He breaks open a chance for them to see again and to recognize the power of God’s love which is stronger than violence, stronger than empire, stronger than death!

Resurrection begins with recognition! Like those ruby red slippers, it’s something they’ve known or could have known from the start when he started teaching them and showing them how to trust the Way - the Way of God’s mercy, healing, justice, and love, for them and the world! For them, it was about recognizing the Risen Christ in their midst! They saw what we can’t! More deeply, it’s about recognizing the choice his risen love offers them and us when he leaves them! For what happens next? They turn from their daze of distraction and despair! They change directions. They know they are empowered to return to the community, share the good news of his risen and lasting love, and become “the People of the Way!” Did you know that is what they were called - the early Christians, before the name “Christian” was used? They were known as “the People of the Way” - of his way, the way of his non-violent, radically inclusive, always inviting, and forgiving love!

A few weeks ago, I shared in some teaching as part of a Lenten study session about James Baldwin. Baldwin is one of several historical and contemporary truth-tellers that are again part of an exhibit of portraits hanging on our walls in the Hastings Common. Our theme this Lent has been Finding Courage in Community - and by virtue of encountering these powerful truth-tellers and their stories, we have been finding courage that inspires! I shared a short video clip of Baldwin to give a sense of his remarkable presence and language. This clip has been haunting me in a good way for weeks since I first stumbled upon it. I’ve asked Lee, our ace AV guy, to put it on the screen. It begins abruptly, so let’s take a breath.²

...

² The clip is from a 1970 documentary short called directed and produced by Terrence Dixon called “[Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris.](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxUdRiVsFu0/)” It was paired with a 2022 instrumental soundtrack by the artist, St Basil. An Instagram version can be found here: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxUdRiVsFu0/>

There's something about his piercing presence and his honesty here. First, about how easy it is to despair, for how many of us get stuck in that "but we-had-hoped" disappointment in ourselves, our loved ones, our leaders, and our world! What strikes me even more is his turn to everyday encounters and the potential for everyday moments of recognition. Walk down any street, any day, he says! Walk out of here today! And remember - recognize - that anyone you see could be you! You could be that person, that monster! You could be that Judas, that Pontius Pilate, that perpetrator, that person across the aisle, that racist, that cynical bystander, that bastard that cut you off in the parking! It's not only we could be; according to Baldwin, we are them! That person is you, he says! That person is me! And this comes from the man who wrote in *The Fire Next Time*: "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving." Amen?

Easter is all about this God. It is the story of God's love that enlarges our imaginations and our capacity, and that gives us constant, daily challenge and opportunity. With Baldwin, this love requires that we first recognize the monsters in our world, *and* that we see them in ourselves, those demons of our own unhealed trauma and pain, of our own anxiety and insecurity, of our most self-centered, fearful, cynical, or apathetic selves and chose, decide not to be any of those monsters. This is the power and the promise of the resurrection. This is what can actively help us halt that persistent cycle of harm and vilification, blaming, shaming and othering, that we do every day, often without even knowing it! To make these daily decisions requires that we join and stay engaged in that unpopular movement of love!

Friends the road out there is *rough*! Our "free" country and "free" world are warring, and our planet is at its knees. And here's where I want to press for a deeper dimension of anagnorisis in our story! What if the true miracle of the resurrection is not only that they or we recognize him for who he is, the risen and redeeming Christ? The resurrection is also what allows him to see and recognize them, to recognize us, as we truly are, in God's sight! It's the God of Psalm 139 that searches us and knows us, that knit us together in the womb, that weaves us together in community! Can we imagine, can we feel this Love searching, knowing, seeing, recognizing, and holding us as God's beloved, no matter what is going on in or around us. No matter the monsters! That's an anagnorisis, a moment of recognition for the ages! Jesus' forgiving love rises, redeems, and recognizes the inherent dignity and belovedness of every person and every living thing, anytime and anywhere! It meets us on the way calls us to be our truest selves! It's what can enlarge us, free *us* to live fearlessly, to rise *in joy*, to walk tall and share the holy purpose and way of love, come what may. Receiving and sharing this kind of resurrection recognition takes practice. It means showing up again and again, where two or three or gathered to resource and nourish ourselves in the countercultural wisdom of our ancestors, or our truth-telling siblings across time! It requires that we welcome the stranger and the other at every turn, even those people and parts of yourself you don't really like, and walking the way together, in love, day by precious day!

One last story. On Friday night, while I was here for a powerful Good Friday service Emma led, my wife Nancy went to a one-man show at the Strand Theatre in Roxbury. She recounted to me a profound moment. The performer's name, like mine, is Daniel, which he told the audience means "God is my judge." Near the end of his brilliant autobiographical, multimedia performance, he shared a conversation with his father, a local pastor and theologian I happen to know. In it, Daniel was questioning whether he believed in God! His father paused and responded beautifully: "What about love?" he said, to which Daniel replied. "Love. I can believe in Love! If Love is judging me, Love will only judge me on how much I have loved!"

We need this kind of Capital L Love that we encounter on the way to and from Emmaus, this divine and lasting love that follows us on the way, that sees us through, in all our faith and questioning, in all our “we had hoped” despair. This is the Love that rises and returns again and again, every day, on any street, in any city, and call us be not only the Body of Christ, the gathered church, but to be his eyes through which we can see anew ourselves and the world. Recognize it! Let it recognize you! *For the heavenly, risen one knows. Heaven knows where we’ve been, and where we are going! Receive the gift of this recognition.* With the open eyes to see, we too can know that we will get there because God’s everlasting love is already and always here. Amen!

