

*The Opening of Eyes: Real Person Involved*  
Luke 13-35

One of my slightly guilty pleasures over the last few months has been a series on HBO called *Succession*. I watched every episode in both seasons of that show, and then, because the characters were so interesting and the story so complicated, I watched the whole thing again. It's the story of a very wealthy family in the media business, based loosely on a conglomerate whose name you'd recognize. The cutthroat ways they deal with each other are really mean and nasty; the awfulness of this family fascinates me. I'm not really recommending the show to you, but I want to tell you about one strand that runs through almost every episode.

This family, like many, is very loyal to one another. So much, that the people who enter as dates or partners, or even who marry a family member, are never able to really break in. There's an airtight, invisible barrier to their acceptance. Senior business associates are valued because they're useful, but even they're expendable; they can be discarded at any time. And then there are people a step or two further outside the bounds of this family. Acquaintances, employees, adversaries. People who stand in their way. People who get damaged in one way or another—by an adult child's recklessness, or the company's mismanagement. Those people the family finds a way to dispose of quickly. It simply removes them from sight. It pays them off or sacrifices them to expedience; all that matters is to get them out of the way of this family's agenda.

There's a phrase that this family uses—they actually say it out loud—when they're taking care of a problem in this way. *No real person involved*, they say; and that simply ends any further reflection on their actions.

*No real person involved.*

I've been thinking about that sentence—that attitude—as we watched this week another avalanche of news about things that shame us in this country. Mass shootings. Black men and boys being killed or injured by police officers charged with keeping order in American communities. It hit me again about how frightening it must be, if you are a black, male person, just to get in a car and drive. How wrong it is that is that is in this country that is for some of us the best place in the world to live, people of color know that for their children, one wrong movement of hands, one step taken backward in fear, one small traffic violation or petty shoplifting experiment can result in death. To see that in any small scrape with the keepers of order you might be treated as if there were *no real person involved*, as if your life doesn't matter at all.

This is not what the Kingdom of God looks like. It's the opposite of it. God's grief for this world must be immense. And this is my country, my people, a system that's working just fine for me, that is causing that grief. I'm having an increasingly difficult time living with myself, thinking of

myself as someone whose life is supposed to resemble Jesus', and not being involved actively in some movement for change. I don't know what to do, exactly; but I'm wondering. And wondering if you are feeling the same nudge I am.

The story Siteri read this morning from the end of Luke's Gospel has characters who also are grieving what has just happened in their country. This story takes place just after the resurrection of Jesus, on the evening of that very first Easter. Two disciples are walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Archaeologists tell us that's a distance of about seven miles. It's significant that we're told they're walking *away* from Jerusalem. What Luke doesn't say, doesn't have to say, is that those disciples are walking away from Jerusalem because they're done. In every other chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus was heading *toward* Jerusalem. That's where everything Jesus talked about was supposed to come together, where his ministry of love and justice would tip things into real change, where the kingdom of God was supposed to arrive.

But that's not what happened. Jesus went to Jerusalem, but he didn't take power there. He was killed, by the keepers of order. Declared guilty of petty, non-violent offenses, and then deemed a danger to society. Disappeared, as if there were no real person involved.

Those two on the road that evening weren't talking about the joy of resurrection; they were talking about the fact that Jesus is dead. They'd left Jerusalem because there was no reason for his followers to stay there. So they're going back to a smaller town, a safer place. Maybe to find new work, or to wait for the next possible Messiah. To grieve, that the world is even a less kind place than they had thought.

A stranger walking in the same direction joins them. Luke's readers know right away that it's Jesus, but these two don't recognize him. This is kind of a theme in all these resurrection stories: people not recognizing Jesus right away. Mary Magdalene thought it was the gardener talking to her at the tomb. Thomas said 'I see you, but I can't be sure it's you until I touch your wounds.' Now Jesus shows up and walks seven miles with two people who had just been with him, and they still don't know who he is. The Jesus they knew had just died. Their eyes were filled with a great sadness. They probably never actually looked up at the face of the traveler who joined them.

In fact, what they talk to this stranger about is their disappointment. How they had hoped that Jesus would be the one to save their people, to give them something to believe in. "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel," they said.

"We had hoped..."

Is there anything sadder than hope in the past tense?

They talk for quite a while...how long does it take to walk seven miles? And they like this stranger. He may not have heard about Jesus' death, but he seems to know a lot about the things that interest them. So as they get near the place where their journey will end, and it looks like the

stranger is going to keep going, they invite him to stop overnight, and have dinner with them. He follows them into their home. He stays while they prepare a meal and set the table.

He's a guest, but he's an odd guest. It's their house, their food, their table. But when the three of them sit down to eat, the guest is the one who acts like the host. He's the one who reaches out and picks up the bread. He says the blessing; he hands a piece of bread to each of them. And suddenly they know who he is. It was the familiarity of it...the way he moved his hands, the same way they'd seen him do on a hillside with five little loaves and two fish; in an upper room, the last time they shared a Passover meal together. Somehow, they just know. "Their eyes were opened," Luke says.

And then he's gone. But they are sure they've seen Jesus. "I knew it!" each of them announces to the other, as if they really had known all along. "Didn't we feel like our hearts were on fire when he was talking to us?" Doesn't everything make sense now?

I wonder how they told this story to their friends. What did they say about what had happened to them, about how they didn't recognize Jesus for two hours while they walked, and then they did? "I recognized the movement of his hands..."? "I knew it was him because it felt like my heart was on fire..."? Sometimes there are no words, no explanation of what we finally come to see.

But I bet that experience changed the way they looked at other strangers who would come to cross their path. I bet after, that they were always looking up, into the face and the eyes of every person who wanted to walk alongside them, or who sat next to them for a meal. I bet from then on, they were watching, always, for that familiar gesture; just a motion, or a word, that would tell them that God was in their midst.

I'm guessing it was still hard to say out loud what they knew about Jesus, what it meant that he'd died and then come back to be with them. That's always going to seem slippery, hard to explain. What did change was the way they talked about people who were strangers to them. Never again did those two talk about other people as if they didn't matter, or treat a stranger as if his destination was less important than their own, or disregard someone else's life as if there were no real person involved. Because, they'd seen, you never know when that stranger might be someone whose hand motions you'd recognize if you sat down for dinner together.

Maybe that's how we too will speak of how our eyes have been opened by the Easter story. We'll say it not just in words about God, but in words about the strangers in our lives. In the way we talk about getting cut off in traffic—by someone who *might* be a jerk, or who might be rushing to get to the hospital, or home to a sick child. In the way we refuse to demonize presidents or legislators or bureaucrats who quite possibly have real lives, real families, real loves, in addition to political positions that annoy us. In the way we respect the dignity of a person who stands at a border fence asking for a safe place for their children to live. In the way we consider the lives of both police officers who are trying to do a scary job *and* black men, real people whose lives are at risk every time a gun gets pulled.

If we actually did talk like that, people would hear what we have learned—that you never know when some slight motion—of the hands, of the heart—will remind you that God is very present, not in spite of the stranger, but *in* the stranger. They would hear it, notice it, because speaking that way is so different from how the rest of the world speaks.

Luke's story, oddly, tells us the name of only one of the two who were walking to Emmaus that day. Cleopas was his name, we're told right at the beginning. The other disciple has no name, even though he recognized Jesus over dinner just as clearly as Cleopas did. It's almost as if Luke left a blank space on purpose, for us to fill in with any name. Maybe even your own.