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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
May 8, 2011
Luke 24:13-35
“OMG - IRL”

Let's begin by decoding today's sermon title: the six letters, O-M-G I-R-L. In the evolution of contemporary human communication, the progression goes from letter writing to e-mails to instant messaging and text messaging. If there are young people in your family – children, grandchildren, whatever – then text messaging is happening around you. Look over their shoulder as thumbs fly on some electronic device and see how they rarely, if ever, communicate in complete sentences; and how words are seldom, if ever, spelled correctly or completely. Phrases are now but a series of short-hand abbreviations: BTW – by the way; LOL – laugh out loud; and OMG – Oh my God!

Secondly, many people today have significant relationships through electronic media without ever meeting one another face to face. Through a variety of means – Facebook conversations, Internet chat rooms, message boards, online dating programs – people get acquainted, talk, Skype, and share, but only later actually meet one another in real life. Hence another text message may go like this: “So nice to finally meet you IRL – in real life.”¹ OMG – Oh my God; IRL – in real life! Now to the sermon title: If the Emmaus road disciples had had cell phones on that famous Easter day long ago, I bet they would have texted the other disciples something like “OMG, just saw Jesus IRL.”

Easter – the day Jesus was raised from the dead. Two disciples, possibly a man and a woman, were walking along talking about how women visiting Jesus' tomb that morning had been told by angels that he was no longer there, but that he was alive. A third person joined them on the road, who is eventually recognized as the resurrected Jesus. Right there in their midst in real life! OMG is no longer a catchphrase but suddenly a literal statement of fact! Now put yourself in that setting. Imagine walking along and Jesus joins you, but you don't recognize him. You are focused on your own agenda, your own task or errand or perhaps your own grief; for whatever reason, your eyes are kept from recognizing who is literally in your midst. And this blindness goes on for a while, until something happens. Something causes you to see things in a whole new light. And you end up, stunned, amazed, humbled, saying to yourself: The living Lord was in my midst – OMG, Jesus IRL.

Now before we are too hard on these disciples for not recognizing Christ, remember that Mary Magdalene saw the risen Lord and thought he was the gardener (Jn 20:15); and when Simon Peter was out fishing, Jesus called to him from the shore but Peter thought it was just a stranger trying to be helpful (Jn 21:4). The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were stunned, sad and confused. Their dreams had been buried with Jesus in a borrowed tomb in the city receding behind them in the distance. They spoke some of the saddest words possible when they said, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” Hope in the past tense. “We had believed things could be different, could be better, but we were wrong. Our hope is gone.”

The Emmaus road disciples re-told the story of what had happened for a stranger who had joined them on the road. Suddenly the stranger challenged them and said, “How foolish you are! How slow of heart and hesitant to believe what has happened!” Pay attention to the sequence of events here: there’s a real period of grief, followed by a reflection on what happened in light of scripture, in light of faith in a God who is Lord of Life and not captive to the powers of darkness and death. And then comes the moment of insight, when eyes are opened, and OMG, Christ is seen in their very midst.

The formula is the same for us today. When we grieve and are troubled, we need to begin by naming that fact. We need to re-tell our story. Then, lest we want to be foolish and slow to believe, we consider the story in light of what our faith tells us. We put God back in the picture. We add a living Christ into the conversation. We allow the Spirit of the Lord, which has blown over the face of this earth for centuries before us and will blow where it wills for centuries to come, to blow into our very soul to stir things up and chase away the spiritual cobwebs so that we can breathe freely at last.

Let’s consider this point from an even more personal perspective. Recall the reaction this past week to the news of Osama Bin Laden’s death by American commandoes. When that news was announced, some people loudly celebrated, moving from a sense of national pride to a less-attractive spirit of triumphalism and gloating. Others challenged this response as unseemly for people of faith, who despite being grateful for the heroism of military personnel and the elimination of a fomenter of evil, remembered being warned in scripture not to rejoice when vengeance is inflicted on one’s enemies (Romans 12:19-21). I think much of the turmoil around Bin Laden’s death was caused by how it forced us to relive the event of 9-11; how, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we had to replay tragic and terrible events in our mind. And in our modern situation, that has meant not only remembering the deadly plane crashes but also our costly, violent, decade-long militaristic responses in Iraq and Afghanistan. Could we have acted otherwise after 9-11? How has Christ’s admonition “O foolish ones, O slow of heart to believe and trust all that the prophets have declared” been spoken to us this past week? There is evil and there are purveyors of evil, but to stop it must we always use the same weaponry and violence as those who threaten us? What might the world look like today if we had responded to our own fear with the courage to love those of whom we are most afraid? If the billions of dollars spent to wage war had been spent to wage peace – on food, water, schools and development projects that sustain life, not destroy it?² That is what Bin Laden’s death has stirred up in us.

Now this can be a healthy process when the stirring up, the dust being blown off our past, is something done by the Holy Spirit. It is something healing and positive when the living Christ is the one walking beside us, talking to us in our real lives, in our real settings of despair and confusion and offering us fresh wisdom and healing for our souls. Such is the promise of Easter resurrection – that life in God, through God, with God, is stronger than all forms of death, and hope – Easter hope, resurrection hope, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” hope – is never a past tense hope, but always a present tense-future promise-until the end of the age type of hope.

Notice one more detail in this story. When were the disciples' eyes opened? Not on the road. Not in the midst of the bible study session. Their eyes were opened and they recognized the risen Lord when they were at table and breaking bread to share a meal together. They were at home around their kitchen table. OMG, Jesus is here IRL. What would it take for us to feel that emotion, to text that message, from our own homes?

I like to imagine that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were a couple, perhaps a man and a wife – two people who have shared a lot of mundane conversations over their kitchen table. I picture them at home talking about bills to be paid when money is in short supply, about family members and holiday get-togethers, about crazy Uncle Louie and the neighbor's new tattoo and when will the kids get a real job. Put yourself in that setting. Whether single, or partnered in a same-gender relationship, married, divorced, young, old, in-between: Who is sitting across from you at that kitchen table as these things are discussed? As bread is broken, the evening news is dissected, and tomorrow's challenges are considered, who is in that conversation? And what if Christ were also there at the table with you?

Better yet, remember that Christ is there with you in the midst of your real life. What does that moment feel like when your eyes are opened and you recognize Him in the breaking of bread, the passing of the butter, the straightening out of the tablecloth? What is it like when a prayer is part of that table ritual, bringing God into our giving thanks for daily food and wishes for world peace? What is it like when the conversation moves from the perfunctory to the personal, from the routine to that which is raw and painful and difficult? Of course Christ is right there. Of course you can pause and allow Christ to get a word into the conversation and in doing so your eyes will be opened. And the Spirit blows the dust off the clutter and confusion in your soul. And your hearts will burn, the scripture story makes sense, and for a while the pieces come together in the puzzle of life.

That's the place to start. Faith – the risen Christ – Hope – they all begin IRL, in real life. On the road, at home, at the kitchen table. In the choices and conversations and the persistent, daily desire to see Christ present beside us. Then, as our hearts are lifted up and burn within us, then we go out and seek out others. In church – in the Upper Rooms where we still gather – in the halls of government – in the streets of our neighborhood. There we go to say, "The Lord has risen indeed!" Remember this good news as you leave this place today, as you walk or drive down the roads back home, back to your own kitchen tables, to break bread how ever and with whomever. Look around. Jesus is with you. OMG.

AMEN

¹ "Even In Real Life, There Were Screens Between Us," Caitlin Dewey, *New York Times*, May 1, 2011, p. ST 6.

² Cf. Presbyterian Peace Fellowship newsletter, May 2, 2011.