

Hope Reclaimed¹

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

April 7, 2024

Text: Luke 24:13-35

Trompe l'oeil. French for “deceive the eye,” this phrase was brought to broad awareness in the wake of the publication of Dan Brown’s blockbuster best-seller of more than a decade ago, The DaVinci Code. This book which rattled cages around the world, especially and surprisingly in the Vatican itself, has as a part of its core thesis the notion of trompe l’oeil – that what we think we see is not what’s really there. Used most notably in art and architecture, the technique of trompe l’oeil is used to fool the seer into seeing something that is not in the scene depicted, or, as was the case in the Dan Brown thesis, not seeing something that was clearly there, when you knew to look for it.

The trompe l’oeil that Dan Brown made the centerpiece of his novel was supposedly embedded into one of the most famous frescoes in the world – *The Last Supper*, painted by Leonardo Da Vinci on the walls of a convent in Milan. Specifically, the trompe l’oeil was supposed to be that Mary Magdalene as Jesus’ lover and the mother of his child was actually in the painting on Jesus’ right in the character most often assumed to be John. All sorts of other symbolism connected to the mystical Priory of Scion group which had guarded the Holy Grail – Mary Magdalene – down through the centuries was also supposedly embedded in the mural as well. This meant Da Vinci’s flaunting of the Grail secret was in plain sight even as the church hierarchy sought to destroy it because of the challenge it presented to church power and authority. I remember well the furor this book presented as folks ran to local libraries and the internet to find images

¹ This sermon is a “remix” of the sermon Heart Burn first preached by Rev. Ruth on April 27, 2014.

of the famous fresco to check it out for themselves. Sure enough, when you knew what to look for, the images were there. And suddenly, this fictional book and its ingenious use of myths and legends which had been floating around for a while, was catapulted to the top of the best seller list even as it set off a firestorm of sorts in the Catholic Church. Amazing what a little trompe l'oeil can do....

I wanted us to think about trompe l'oeil a bit this morning – questioning what we see or don't see, as we consider today's scripture from Luke. I want us to think about it because it's a legitimate question to pose in connection to this story of Jesus appearing to two disciples who were walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus later that same day of the Resurrection. As Jesus came up and joined them, walking along with them and talking to them about what had happened that so upset them, why is it that they didn't recognize him? The text just says "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" but what does that mean, exactly? Was Jesus disguised somehow? Had the experience of the resurrection so changed his physical appearance that they just didn't recognize him? Or was it some sort of optical illusion, like a trompe l-oeil?

Worthy of noting here is that an optical illusion, which a trompe l'oeil is, can take three forms. It can be a literal illusion, like the elongated shadows stretching out in front of you as you walk down a path with the sun in just the right place, making you look 12 feet tall in the process. A second is a physiological illusion which is what happens when there is excessive stimulation on the eye which confuses the brain into seeing something that isn't there – like seeing multi-colored spots after you've stared at the sun or even a bright light for too long. The third is what are called cognitive illusions. These are unconscious inferences your brain makes connected to visual stimuli which causes you to see things as you think they should be and not as

they are. For example, when you are positive your keys have to be in a certain place in your house because that's where you always put them. But when you go to get them, they're not there. You swear you can see yourself putting them there so you expect to see them there, but they're not. And, if you're like me, that's because they're still hanging from the door knob since you were in such a hurry you forgot to pull them out before closing the door.

My point is that when we hear this story of Jesus appearing to Cleopas and the other disciple who is never named, we just take it on face value that they didn't recognize him. But I think the question of why they didn't recognize him is too important to skip over. Was his appearance so changed he was literally unrecognizable? Or had they been crying so much that the physiology of their eyes combined with exhaustion made it impossible for them to see him as himself? Or did they not recognize him because they didn't expect to see him so they just didn't see him as himself. He was dead, after all. They knew he was dead. Maybe they were there and saw his dead body taken down from the cross. Maybe they had just heard it from the others who had been there. However it came to be that they knew, they did know that Jesus was dead so it would never have occurred to them that this guy who started walking along with them was Jesus. It couldn't be – so it wasn't. That simple.

I love it that Jesus plays dumb when he first comes up to them and asks them what they are talking about so diligently. He's not tipping his hand as to who he is. He wants to see something about them. He wants to learn something about them. So, he asks what they're talking about and he listens to their response. They can't believe he doesn't know what happened – that Jesus has been killed and then raised again. They are totally confused by all this, that is clear. So, Jesus begins to explain to them why all this happened by

teaching them – rabbi once more – about the Scriptures and how all this happened in fulfillment of the Scriptures. They are so engrossed in conversation that the time of their journey goes quickly and before long, they reach their destination. They start to turn off the road and realize this person they have so enjoyed talking to – they still haven't recognized Jesus – isn't coming along. So, they ask him to join them for a meal. And he does.

Jesus readily accepted their invitation and came into the house with them to get something to eat as they had offered. And as they sat down to eat, to break bread together, Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it and it was then they recognized who it was. It was Jesus! This one action – more so than all the words they exchanged in the long walk to get there – this one action of Jesus is how they ultimately knew who he was. They knew him by what he did, not what he said. And once they knew him, they had no doubt. Once they recognized him, he vanished. And isn't that curious? It would seem that being known, being recognized was what Jesus had been going for all along. He talked and he taught and he walked along with them. But they didn't know him until he did something they recognized and what they recognized was the blessing and breaking of the bread. Had they heard about that last meal Jesus had with the disciples? Had they maybe even been there? Or were they remembering something else entirely – like the loaves and fishes story when Jesus made two loaves and five fish stretch to feed 5000? We don't know because the text doesn't say. It doesn't really matter because the point is that they knew Jesus when he did something, not when he talked.

Doing more than talking made Jesus recognizable to Cleopas and his friend. Doing and not talking opened their eyes to who they had been walking and talking with. Only then did they stop to realize how they had been *feeling* while he was talking. “Were not our hearts

burning within us while he was talking with us on the road?” they said to each other. Something amazing was happening to them because of this conversation they were having with a total stranger on a day when they were so devastated, so upset they didn’t know what they were doing. They felt it but they didn’t understand it, so they just kept moving, just kept talking. And then, in that one moment it all came clear when Jesus did something that made all those feelings, all those experiences, all those thoughts just slip into place. In that moment everything made sense. In that moment it all became clear – the amazing thing God had done in bringing their beloved Jesus back to them. And then, just like that, he was gone again, leaving them alone with their thoughts and feelings, their very lives up-ended once more, just as it had been when they left Jerusalem that morning for the long walk to Emmaus. Except now everything was different. And they were still trying to figure it all out.

And so are we. More than 2000 years later we are still trying to understand what it means that the resurrected Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus. In the rational, secular world, this whole story just doesn’t make sense. We can find ways to explain it away, as an optical illusion – a trompe l’oeil of some sort – caused by physical or emotional exhaustion perhaps. But it is so much more than that. Rationality and scientific certainty just has no place in this story at all. It never did. This story is about one thing and one thing only, hope reclaimed. This story is about recognizing the Risen Christ in all the places he appears in our lives and the burning hearts we have when we see and experience all those Jesus moments for what they are. Those moments happen all the time but so often we miss them because we aren’t looking for them. We don’t see them for what they are because we are so disconnected from our

need for hope reclaimed, for our hearts to burn within us as we rediscover the promise and hope of the Risen Christ.

We know we love Jesus when we are here and thinking about him, thinking about how God is alive and active in our lives. We get it when we're here. But when we're out in the world each day, walking down our own proverbial roads to Emmaus through the tasks and chores of daily life and work, we just don't see those Jesus moments all around us. The sad truth is that we don't even try, at least most of the time. We don't see Jesus in the homeless person on the street or the harried mom in the grocery store. We don't see Jesus in the stories on the TV news about genocide in Gaza or the war in Ukraine. We don't see Jesus in the faces of low wage workers right here in the US scrambling to get by. We don't see Jesus in angry, disrespectful teenagers or fragile, frightened elders. But he's there in all those places, dear friends. We don't see Jesus in those moments, in those people, because we're not expecting to see him there. So we don't.

But, dear friends, Jesus is there – Jesus is here with us – all the time, every day, if only we take the time to look for him. Jesus is here and he is teaching us something in all those Jesus moments, if only we would be open to learning. Jesus is asking something of us if only we would be open to answering. Jesus is counting on us to do something to reclaim hope in our own lives, to be his hands and feet in the world if only we are willing to do it. The real question for us is, then, will we recognize those Jesus moments for what they are, or not. Will we respond with hope and hearts burning to be who it is Jesus needs us to be in response to all the needs in this broken, hurting world – however small or insignificant our actions might seem to be? Or will we just keep trudging forward through our lives with blinders on, looking for more antacid to deal with the worry and stress the world dishes up every day? Heartburn or hearts burning? Hope reclaimed

or set aside. The choice is yours. Just remember, though, you never really know who it is walking beside you. Amen.