

Too Focused on the Problem to See the Answer
Luke 24:13-35

I enjoy watching the NCIS television series, all three of them – NCIS, NCIS Los Angeles, and NCIS New Orleans. If you are unfamiliar with them, NCIS stands for Naval Criminal Investigative Service. In case you are wondering if NCIS is a real thing, yes, it is. It's been around long before the television series, though known only in military circles. I think what intrigues me about the shows is that in the beginning they are given situations that relate to navy or marine personnel but no real clues. Through much of the hour long episode the team struggles often too focused on the problem to see the answer until just as the episode is about to end someone has an “aha” moment and the answer, which was often there all along, surfaces.

The disciples of Jesus have the same struggle: they are too focused on the problem to see the Answer. Close your eyes and imagine what two of them are experiencing (*Read text here*).

So distraught and confused are these two men that they barely pick up their heads; they only notice that someone has joined them on their journey because they see another pair of feet. It's understandable: sorrow, frustration, disappointment, and fear tend to turn our focus inward. Their best friend and teacher was crucified without just cause and now the body is missing from the tomb. Not only that, but some of the women claim to have seen an angel who told them Jesus was alive. It's all too confusing to understand. Who do you trust? What's the answer?

Those are the questions many today are asking. With all the reports of violence, school shootings, immigration issues, racial injustices, wars, conflicts, drug and alcohol abuse, economic issues ... the list seems nearly endless, some are distraught, many are in fear, and everyone agrees it's too confusing to understand – even “experts” don't really know what is happening, where the bottom is, and how to climb out of the hole we are in. The government

steps in with sweeping measures sure to make a difference; only now we are being told they aren't really doing what was expected. Who do you trust? What's the answer?

The crises are real, of that there is no doubt. The problems must be addressed. Families are reassessing their priorities as incomes diminish, employment is temporarily or permanently terminated, and the cost of everything from groceries to utilities continues to rise. The leadership of your church wrestles with what steps should be taken to insure safety when we meet together in the wake of church shootings. How do we do ministry if we appear to be closed to the people of our community rather than open while at the same time appearing to care for their wellbeing? Will guns or the absence of guns keep our schools and communities safe?

It is too easy to focus on the problem, too easy to step into survival mode, too easy to give up. Why do we always take the easy way? Didn't Jesus say, "Wide is the gate and easy the way that leads to destruction" (Mt.7:13)? Cleopas and his friend had resigned themselves to the fact that Jesus was dead and were heading home in despair not knowing what to do next. Too easily we resign ourselves to the apparent crisis and in despair aren't sure what to do next.

What's really sad is that when we take the easy way we miss the answer. When we focus on the problems of life, when we strive to survive, when we say, "Oh, what's the use?" and give up, we miss the miracle of resurrection. Praise God that even though we are too focused on the problem to see the answer, that that doesn't mean the answer is not there. Jesus walked with Cleopas and friend even though they didn't recognize Him; and Jesus is with us even though we don't recognize Him either.

Notice that Jesus didn't come in a flash of light with a grand entrance announcing, "Tada! Here I am boys." That's what we often want though, do we not? We want a miracle – "Nothing fancy, though that recent \$560 million Powerball win by the lady in New Hampshire was pretty impressive." I can almost hear Dr. Paul and Deb (our finance chair and treasurer, respectively),

“A title of that would take care of all our church’s problems.” That’s would not be a miracle - in fact it’s a curse. No, the miracle is that Jesus comes along side us to walk with us in our frustration and confusion to remind us of what is really important. The miracle is that Jesus loves us too much not to let us experience his resurrection. The miracle is that Jesus would chide us for being foolish and unbelieving. The miracle begins when we remember what God has already said and done.

Our text tells us that Jesus took their focus off the problem and directed it to the answer by explaining to them, beginning with Moses and the prophets, what the Scriptures say concerning Jesus. I would love to know just what Jesus said, though I am certain it is not shared so that we will go find out for ourselves. Perhaps it was something like this:

In Genesis, Jesus is the Seed of the woman
In Exodus, the Passover Lamb
In Leviticus, the atoning Sacrifice
In Numbers, the bronze serpent
In Deuteronomy, the promised Prophet
In Joshua, the Captain of the Lord’s army
In Judges, the Deliverer
In Ruth, the heavenly Kinsman
In the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the promised King
In Ezra and Nehemiah, the Restorer of the nation
In Job, the Redeemer
In Psalms, the All in All
In Proverbs, the Pattern
In Ecclesiastes, the Goal
In Song of Solomon, the Beloved
In the Prophets, the coming Prince of Peace

The disciples still don’t recognize Jesus; they do not yet realize the Answer to their problem is walking with them. But, as they stop focusing on the problem and focus instead of God’s promises, their fear subsides, their hope is rekindled, and their faith begins to return. By the time they reach Emmaus, their hearts are burning within them. They sense, I believe, that there is an answer; but, they are not yet aware of what it is.

There is one who would love it if we would just keep our focus on our problems. Yes the devil would love that; because when we are focusing on our problems, whatever they are, we are not focusing on God. But God, the Holy Spirit is right there with us. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would remind us of everything Jesus has taught us (Jn.14:26). The Holy Spirit will nudge us back to God's Word, to read it, to remember what God has done and promised, to help us get our focus off of the problem and onto God. Then our fears subside, our hope is rekindled, and our faith returns.

But notice that Jesus is not yet revealed. Jesus is revealed when they ask him to stay with them and become a part of their lives. It is in the ordinary act of sitting down to a meal that they all of a sudden realize not only who is with them, but also the answer to their problem. It is when Jesus takes the ordinary bread, in prayer thanks God for his provision, and then breaks the bread to distribute it to them that they understand the real problem is fear and the real answer is trusting Jesus. The miracle they longed for was to see so that they may believe. The miracle they needed was to believe so that could see. Jesus, in reminding them of the ordinary miracles of God's provision, showed them how to trust again and in the trusting they saw the answer.

The problems we face in life are real; of that I have no doubt. But we will not find the answer to our dilemma when we are focusing on our problem and responding in fear. The answer will be revealed to us as we, remembering what God has promised and done, allow the ordinary miracles of God's provision to help us trust the very One who loved us so much that he removed every obstacle so we could again be in relationship with Him. If God did all that, will he not also provide for your every earthly need – oh, you, and me, of little faith?