Making Contact: Luke 24 as a Model for Meeting Jesus Today

**Preliminary Remarks:** Before getting in to our topic today, a continuation of our Making Contact series, I want to comment on the other reading in today’s lectionary readings:

Micah 6: “do justice, love kindness, walk humbly”

A big justice concern in Torah/Prophets: care of stranger/those taking refuge. People of Israel fled as refugees to Egypt. Jesus and parents fled as refugees to Egypt during Herod’s reign of terror.

Friday was national holocaust remembrance day. In 1939 FDR refused to take in Jewish refugees from Germany, citing national security. Many returned to be killed in holocaust.

Later we rounded up Japanese Americans and put them in camps for duration of war. Bob Williams father in one of those camps. Under Reagan, given formal apology and 20K in reparations, something never done for African American slave family.

Do justice.

On same day we were remember holocaust, our govt banned all Muslims (only Muslim) refugees from 7 nations entering U.S. even though in past 40 years no Americans killed by refugees from these 7 nations. Many more killed by White Supremacists, by toddlers armed with guns.

In partnership with JFS we have supported Syrian refugees (now banned permanently if Muslim). JFS reports these refugees more traumatized than any other group they’ve seen. Have undergone extreme vetting that took close to 2 years, interrogations by 7 security agencies. Add now to their trauma their fear for loved ones back in camps, and knowledge that they can’t leave country for a funeral. [Will contact JFS to see if anything we can do]

In 1939/1940 church largely silent in face of this injustice. Let’s not repeat the injustice of silence today. [Prayer]

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Making Contact: Luke 24 as a Model for Meeting Jesus Today

Begin with the story contained in your sheets there. In Luke 24, two disciples are walking from Jerusalem to village of Emmaus on evening of the day when rumors began to circulate that Jesus had risen from the dead—first Easter Sunday evening. Grieving and discouraged, they are trying to make sense of the events that presently make no sense to them at all. As they are walking along, a stranger joins them. Not unusual: No one wants to walk alone on robber-infested routes between towns in Israel.

As the stranger comes alongside, he wonders what they are discussing so intently? They can’t believe he hasn’t heard about the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, who captured the affection of the Passover crowds, the opposition of some of their leaders, and eventually, the terrifying wrath of Rome.

“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” (Luke 24: 7)

The stranger is doing what Rabbis of the time did: he engages in Midrash, the act of interpreting and commenting on sacred text.

As they reach their destination, the two invite their companion to join them at inn for night. Seated for a meal, he blesses the bread, breaks it for them, and in that moment, they recognize him as the Jesus they had known and simultaneously, he disappears!

Later, they comment on their shared experience of the stranger’s midrash: “ Didn’t our hearts burn within us, while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us.” (Luke 24: 32)


Luke is about life and ministry of Jesus leading up to his crucifixion and resurrection. Acts recounts how church continued experience a living Jesus after his death—a presence mediated thru the Spirit.

This portion of Luke is part of a sub-genre within the gospels called “resurrection appearance.” For seven weeks after resurrection, Jesus appears off and on to various people. These sorts of resurrection appearances—Jesus in a transfigured bodily form
(people touched him)—ended. But after Pentecost, start up again but in a different form, and Luke 24 is closer to that different form.

In all the other resurrection appearances, Jesus startles them when he appears. They gasp! He tells them *don’t be afraid I’m not a ghost.* Then gives them a message, which is recorded for us.

Luke 24 is different: they interact with Jesus not knowing he’s Jesus. Jesus tells them important things but Luke doesn’t bother to tell us what they are. Because maybe that’s not his point. The *content* of what the risen Jesus said is less the point than *how they experienced him.* And it happens in this elusive, indirect way.

Because the way those two disciples on the road to Emmaus experienced Jesus is more like the way we can experience Jesus.

That’s our concern in this series, *Making Contact.* How can we make contact, through the Spirit with this risen Jesus?

Their interactions with Jesus are rather ordinary. The interactions occur during a long in which “*They were kept from recognizing him*” [lit. their eyes were held] They don’t know he’s Jesus until the end when he disappears. No drama at time, that came later.

This means that all the *consciousness awareness* of someone-known-to-be-Jesus occurs only *in retrospect.* It’s not as though Jesus is hidden for most of the walk and then at the end he reveals himself and they finish the conversation. No, he’s hidden until the very end—and *just as soon as they realize* “O my, this stranger who is blessing and breaking the bread is Jesus!” He disappears! Rembrandt depicts the moment of recognition with a POOF! like the smoke residue of a firecracker after it has exploded.

I’m drilling into this because it means their *conscious awareness of* Jesus as Jesus, not a stranger—*Oh, this is Jesus close to me, speaking with me*—happens in the *realm of their memory,* a realm that includes functions of the *imagination.*

Again, bear with me. I’m interested in what’s really going on when people experience Jesus! Last Sunday *Steve* told a story of people receiving Immanuel Prayer which helps people experience Jesus, using memory and imagination.

He’s driving to IC for a Blue Ocean Conference with Cassie and Penny. Oh-Oh! They love Immanuel Prayer and can’t wait to try it on Steve. Steve grew up in a church that said
the Bible is the only source of knowledge about God—no way to experience Jesus directly. But he’s older now and willing to try.

Penny-Cassie ask him to close his eyes and identify a happy memory. He does, and remembers getting a hole-in-one last year with his then HS senior son Max. He tells them this memory. They encourage him to focus on the memory a little longer to fill in the details—the sights, the sounds, the feel. He then describes the more detailed version to them.

Then Penny & Cassie invite Steve to imagine where Jesus might have been, perhaps unrecognized at the time by Steve, in that happy memory. Steve gives it a try: he pictures Jesus up on the green ahead of him, when his drive goes into the hole. Jesus is excited, yelling at people nearby that Steve has aced the hole. Steve, probably a little sheepishly, shares this with Cassie & Penny.

They say, “Oh that’s good. Now see if there are any more details.” He closes his eyes and pictures Jesus again. Then something cool happens: in his minds eye Jesus tells Steve that he Jesus is proud of him. Like Steve is proud of his son Max, Jesus is proud of Steve. Like Max is excited and proud of his hole-in-one Jesus is too. While Steve is telling us all this story last week, he gets choked up at this part because it’s a much more personal experience of Jesus than Steve has had before and it touched him deeply.

That’s Immanuel Prayer. It happens within us at the intersection of memory and imagination. Same as two on road to Emmaus.

Neuroscientists have confirmed that memory and imagination are distinct processes that overlap. It makes sense: we use memory in imagination. If I say imagine a duck, you access duck memories then picture a duck. If all you’ve seen is Mallard ducks you don’t imagine a Black-Bellied Whistling Duck

Also know memories may include scraps of imagination. Not just a photograph of what happened. Memories are shaped by emotion we are feeling at time, what we focus on. In recall, we easily fill in gaps with imagination. I might even “remember” doing that nice thing for Julia when I only imagined doing that nice thing. There’s a trace experience, but we also add scraps of imagination.
So these two—memory and imagination—are closely related. And they meet, memory and imagination, in the hippocampus. A structure in mid-brain (not University of Hippopotami.)
Well, this is also where the two disciples on road to Emmaus had their conscious awareness of Jesus (the part where they knew it was Jesus). In real-time, Jesus was present but they just didn’t recognize it. The recognition happened later in their hippocampus. Maybe that’s how it works a lot.

Here’s one I had a few months ago at the Blue Ocean Summit.
On Friday night session, surrounded by people I love doing things I enjoy, started feeling super anxious. The physical format of church was reminding me of the last time I was at the church I used to pastor (Exactly 3 years earlier). Carpet was similar, elevated stage the chairs, the way the band sounded. And it was triggering me, because the last time I was in as space like that was, for reasons that don’t matter here, distressing, even traumatic.

If you’ve had a sudden surge of bad feelings from the past invading a happy moment in your present you know what that’s like.

On Saturday morning, I dragged myself back to that sanctuary and guess what? Adey Wassink led an Immanuel Prayer exercise. She had us pair up. I paired up with my brother-in-law, Bill then coached us from front. I went first, and my happy memory was being with Bill at Yosemite maybe 15-20 years earlier. So I told him that memory which involved the two of us running down from half-dome and feeling total joy—like I was flying and had a second wind that would last forever (“When I run I feel his pleasure”)

Bill listened and did his part: “Go back to that memory and see if you can picture Jesus in the scene.”

I dutifully complied, but the memory shifted a little. It was before the running from down from half-dome and more the trudging up to half-dome. I remembered being anxious as we got to half-dome because I have an aversion to heights and end of climb is dicey.
Bill was hell-bent to go full distance and I decided to skip the last bit. Remembering stories of people falling off half-dome (it happens) and picturing myself calling Bill’s wife Pat to say, “He fell off and I didn’t stop him going up there. I’m so sorry!”

In this second memory, I was tuned into the anxiety I felt on the way up to half-dome and, also, the rivalry I felt with Bill because he was more daring than I was.
So I asked myself where Jesus might have been in that scenario.
And what popped into my mind was Jesus, going off with Bill as he was making the final-risky climb up half-dome. Jesus was as non-anxious as Bill. But when he came back, he seemed totally fine with my staying behind. Any brother-in-law rivalry I felt with Bill going on ahead being the better man than me and all that male-pattern-maleness, just evaporated. Jesus paid it no mind.

Then Bill and I took off down hill and the running was wonderful and I pictured Jesus right with me. What started as an anxious time ended great.

And I don’t know why or how, but having that Immanuel Prayer experience in that church worship space that had been triggering my bad feelings, kind of eased/erased bad feelings and I was fine after that. It didn’t hurt Emily gave her dynamite talk right after that. And got a standing ovation.

BACK TO LUKE 24: Luke was a companion of Paul (who is featured in the book of Acts). And Paul, of course, is someone who, unlike the other apostles, never knew Jesus before his resurrection.

.... Just as we have never known Jesus before his resurrection. The only Jesus we have known is the One who somehow gets through to us after having died and risen from the dead.

In this chapter that stands between the end of the Luke and the beginning of Acts, it seems we are being prepared for the kind of experience of Jesus that will become commonplace in the sequel, an experience in which we are invited to participate.

Jesus will be with them, though they may or may not be aware of his presence.

The episodes of conscious awareness—Oh this is Jesus near me, communicating with me—will be sporadic, will come and go. And they will often take place in the realm where memory and imagination intersect.

Luke suggests these moments will come sacramentally—that is they will be conveyed through ordinary material means: a conversation with a stranger or a friend or both, a discussion about the meaning of events or the meaning of Scripture, the breaking of bread and the blessing of wine in a meal shared with others.
I think Luke wants us to see that *nature of the experience* of Jesus by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is very much like the experience of those who are guided by Jesus once the Spirit hit the scene in the book of Acts.

And the point of all this seems to be that Jesus, through the Spirit, continues to function as our **Rabbi**. He’s here to guide us and we can meet him in our hippocampus.

**QUIET REFLECTION**

We’ll take about 5 minutes now to do an Immanuel Prayer exercise. Fine to spend the time any way you like of course.

Note: doing this with a trusted partner that you feel comfortable with is more effective, but this can also give you a feel. As more of us learn how to do this, more opportunities for the pair up and try it approach. We’re learning together.

We’re all different. Different settings are more or less effective for relaxing enough to access a memory and activate your imagination to see where Jesus might be in that memory. So it’s fine if this is just for you a going-thru-the-motions exercise. Learning the motions will help you give it a try when the time is more suitable for how you work.

I’m going to function as your prayer partner. My job is to

1. Invite you to identify a positive memory.
2. Suggest that you take time to focus on the memory so it becomes more vivid—more detailed.
3. Ask you to thank God as you understand God for the goodness that is part of this memory.
4. Invite you to imagine where Jesus (or God as you understand God, as long as that good is good-kind-compassionate and for you) is in that memory.
5. Suggest that you take time to focus on that aspect of the memory—what Jesus is saying/doing/his body language/your sense of his feeling toward you.

It’s fine if at first your memory and your imagination is a little wispy. With practice it becomes easier. So be accepting of whatever happens.