

# Encounters of the Fifth Kind

Luke 24:13-32

Preached April 4, 2010 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

**Introduction.** A week ago this past Wednesday, Patty called me and asked, "Where are you going to spend the night this evening?" Initially I wondered if I had done something out of line that morning and she was giving me a subtle hint that she did not want me to come home. But I responded, "At home." Then she said, "You can't. A 1½ mile area around Gold Point Circle has been cordoned off and evacuated." She went on to explain that law enforcement from local police to ATF had been called in to investigate a tractor trailer that was believed to be loaded with explosives.

When I hung up, I immediately went on line to find what was being reported. The information was sketchy at best as it reported on this potentially lethal situation. I wondered, "Is this for real? Are people overreacting? Is this a crazy terrorist bent on doing destruction? Could it be part of a plot to do damage to the nuclear plant?"

In a few hours, all was cleared and I was able to go home and sleep in my own bed. It turned out that the owner of the truck, who had personal belongings in the trailer, traveled about the country talking about the Constitution. Apparently the bomb sniffing dogs hit on the smell of some spent shotgun shells in the trailer. Isn't amazing, even in our day of instant communication, how confusing some incidents are to understand and interpret?

**Unfolding of the story.** One of the most confusing times in the lives of the followers of Jesus happened three days after the crucifixion. Some had witnessed and nearly all had heard how Jesus had been arrested, tried, crucified and buried. But on that first day of the week, unusual news began to circulate that Jesus' body was missing and women who had gone to the tomb had seen an angel or angels who said Christ was alive. All of this had happened in the early hours of the morning. As the day progressed, followers of Jesus who were in or around Jerusalem began to receive the information.

Morning had come and gone and it was into the afternoon when two of the Jesus followers decided it was time to make their way home to the town of Emmaus, about a 2½ hour journey. As they walked, they discussed the events and all they had

heard. Soon they were joined by a stranger, who ended up being not so strange. For some reason, they did not recognize this stranger as Jesus.

The stranger asked them what they were discussing. They acknowledged the stranger and engaged in dialog with him. They explained that they were discussing the events and rumors regarding what had happened to Jesus. The stranger immediately began to explain that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer before he entered his glory. Then he began a walk through the scriptures explaining how they related to what happened to Jesus. There on that road, these two had a personal encounter with Jesus. As he explained the scriptures, their hearts burned within them. They felt something special as they heard him talking.

A few weeks ago I went to get a haircut. (It takes longer than you might think because my barber has a tough time finding my hair.) A mother and daughter team operate the shop. On this occasion, the daughter cut my hair. Not long after she started, she asked, "You are pastor, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." She asked where my church was. What followed was a wonderful conversation about God, the church, and her desire to get involved in a church where she could learn the Bible. Apparently, she had last been in church in her childhood. There the preaching had frightened her. I invited her to come.

I went into the barbershop that day to get a haircut. But while I was there, I had an encounter with Jesus. Through a young lady who has an interest in God and going to church, I sensed Christ's presence. As we talked, I felt my heart burning within me. Jesus was present with us in our conversation. It is interesting that I, the preacher, did not start the discussion about God. My barber did. Like the couple walking to Emmaus, we often encounter Jesus at unexpected times in unexpected places.

**Urged to stay.** When the couple reached their destination, Jesus pretended that he was going farther. So the couple extended some good Southern hospitality and invited the man into their home: "*Stay with us,*

*because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over.*" Luke tells us that they "strongly urged" Jesus to stay.

Probably there were several factors at play for this couple in inviting the stranger to stay. In part, it was an issue of their culture of hospitality. Travel at night was risky and there were few Motel 6's with their lights on. These were probably kind and caring people who were concerned about the stranger's welfare and needs. But I also suspect there was something more. They had found comfort in this man's words and wanted to stay engaged with him.

Hospitality is important in nearly every culture. It is an important mark of human love and compassion. As a pastor, I have been welcomed into the finest homes money can buy. I have also been welcomed into homes of people stricken with poverty and had chickens running in and out of the dwelling. In all those places, I have been treated as a royal guest and friend. In most of those places, my hosts did not want me to leave quickly or rush off.

In the Emmaus story, we find a wonderful truth related to Jesus. These disciples stayed engaged with Jesus by inviting him into their home. They did not want him to disappear along the road but they wanted more interaction. They strongly urged him to stay.

I am afraid that often we disengage from Christ too quickly. Having God moments when Christ is near us and we encounter him are not that uncommon. From time to time, we feel our hearts burning within us. We have goose bumps rise when we hear a song or watch a particular scene of a movie. We have a conversation with a person about God stuff. We experience a beautiful sunrise. We do an altruistic act and feel good about what is happening. We attend a celebratory Easter worship service like this one. Our hearts do burn within us. But often these are parting and fleeting experiences. We allow Jesus to go on by and we fail to invite him in to our home. When we fail to stay engaged with Jesus, our spiritual experiences become little more than a series of heartburn that has little depth and impact on our lives and our world.

The writer of Revelation captured this picture vividly as he recorded the words of Jesus: *Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me* (3:20). Dare we invite Christ to come into our lives and be

with us where we really live? What would have happened if this couple had allowed the stranger to go on?

**Eyes are opened.** While Jesus was staying with the Emmaus couple, they sat at the table to eat. The ordinary supper table became a sacred table that evening. An ordinary meal became extraordinary. The guest at the table became the host.

Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. These words are what one commentator describes as "Jesus' signature." When Jesus fed the 5,000, he took the bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to the disciples. When he shared the last supper with the disciples, he took the bread, blessed and broke it and gave it. These disciples knew of this signature. Later Christian communities to whom Luke was writing recognized (we recognize) these words. They are a signature of our Lord.

Are there signatures that you recognize from people you know and love? One dear saint who was a part of a church I served always opened his prayers with, "Thank you for the blessed privilege of prayer" (Charlie Ellis). My father, when he says grace for the meal, will say, "Bless this food to the nourishment of our body and us to thy service." Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to his disciples.

When Jesus took the bread and broke it, something of great significance happened to the two Emmaus disciples – their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus. They went from a state of ignorance to knowledge. Jesus was in their midst. This one who had been with them was Jesus.

This event of their eyes being opened is worth serious thought. Luke began by telling us that when Jesus first joined them on the journey, their "eyes were kept from recognizing him." It was as though their eyes were kept captive and could not see. When Jesus broke the bread their eyes were opened. Understand, they did not open their eyes but their eyes were opened.

Here we find the element of mystery. The implication seems to be that God opened their eyes and they recognized Jesus. This was not something they initiated or did. It was done to them or for them. It was an act of God's grace. He opened their eyes to see the risen Christ.

Here again we see the divine-human pattern. Jesus comes to us, often at

unexpected times and in unexpected ways, and we feel our hearts strangely warmed. But those encounters have a limited impact on us. There is the need for us to stay engaged in the relationship with Christ and invite him into our lives. Through that longer engagement, God is able to act and to open our eyes so we can fully recognize Jesus.

Several years ago a new choir and church member sat in this choir loft during a communion Sunday. When the invitation was given to receive the sacrament, she felt as though she was not ready to receive. When the choir went to the table, she was left alone. She began to feel embarrassed and somewhat sorry for herself. So she closed her eyes. In a moment she felt there was someone seated next to her. When she opened her eyes, no one was there. She was convinced that the "presence" was the Lord being with her to comfort her. For her it was an encounter with the Risen Christ. This person's experience did not end there. Some 34 years later, she is still a faithful member of the congregation and serves the Lord fully by giving herself in various forms of ministry. She has continued to stay engaged with Jesus.

**Response to the Word.** Before I conclude, I want to turn to the title of this sermon – *Encounters of the Fifth Kind*. I borrowed this from language of those who explore encounters with extra-terrestrials. (Immediately allow me to say, I put no confidence in the reports of encounters). But the language can be descriptive for us in relating to Jesus. An encounter of the first kind – sighting of a UFO, second kind – evidence is found, third kind – a personal encounter, fourth kind – an abduction (that does not sound very friendly does it?). My desire for each of us is that with Christ, we will have an encounter of the "fifth dimension" – in our encounter with him, we will invite him into our lives and remain engaged in relationship with him.

Today most of us have had some type of encounter with Jesus. We have felt his presence. I urge you to stay engaged with Christ and invite him into your life. Put yourself in a place where God can open your eyes.

I invite you to join me in a moment of silence for a time to speak in the quietness of our prayers to Christ to invite him in to live within us.