

“Their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” (Lk 24.16 NRSV)

Third Sunday of Easter, PLTS chapel (April 9, 2008)

Aristotle, *Poetics* (1452a-1455a) names two primary elements of dramatic situations, the first one, “reversal” of roles (περιπέτεια), the second, “recognition,” in other words, realization of the truth, the opening of the eyes, or as one author vividly puts it, the sudden lightning-flash in the darkness (ἀναγνώρισις). Recognition is a change from ignorance to knowledge. It may result from memory or reasoning, but the best kind Aristotle says is “that which results from the actions alone.”

Luke’s Emmaus story climaxes when the two friends suddenly *recognize* Jesus, resurrected from the dead, serving them the Lord’s Supper “from the actions alone.” “There could hardly be a better illustration of Aristotle’s ‘recognition.’ Luke’s story, of course, adds a fine irony. The reader knows already, or can guess, who the stranger is, so we watch the two friends tripping as they charge him with ignorance, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know ...?”¹ (24.18)

The same storyteller crafts the second volume, Acts of the Apostles, including the striking story of Peter’s escape from prison in chap. 12, where again, we see Aristotle’s key element in dramatic stories at work, recognition,² or rather, the lack of recognition. King Herod “laid violent hands” on some believers, including having James, John’s brother, killed. (12.1-2) Then he seized Peter and put him in prison, with four squads of soldiers to guard this peasant fisherman. Luke tells us, “the church prayed fervently to God for him.” (12.5) To read Luke’s own words: “The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And the chains fell off his wrists.... Peter went out and followed him; he did *not realize* that what was happening with the angel’s help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision.” (12. 6-7, 9 NRSV) A verse later, when they are out in Jerusalem walking along, “then Peter came to himself and said, ‘Now I am sure (ὁ Πέτρος ἐν ἑαυτῷ γενόμενος εἶπεν· νῦν οἶδα) that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me....” (12.11a) As in the Emmaus story, there is a strange visitor, a journey walking along the road, and a lack of awareness, followed by sudden recognition. Like Cleopas and his friend in Luke 24, like us at times, Peter was a bit slow to recognize what was happening.

He then goes to Mary’s house, where many were praying. Again we hear a name, Rhoda, the maid, who indeed *recognized* Peter, and was so happy that she ran back in an announced him,

¹ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, “The Moment of Recognition: Luke as Story-Teller” (The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 21 February 1978; University of London, Athlone, 1978) 15 pp., at p. 9.

² Nuttall 8.

without opening the gate. The congregation inside, in intense prayer for Peter's release, responded, "You are out of your mind!" (12.15 NRSV) "Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw [recognized] him, and were amazed." (12.16)

The Emmaus and the Jerusalem stories have a similar phrase, "and their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Luke 24.31), and second, "and they opened [the door], and saw [recognized] him" (Acts 12.16). We are reading one fulfillment of the first Servant song in Isaiah (42.6b-7), "I have given you as a covenant to the people ... to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."³

Luke's infancy narrative has a third such story, which centers on Mary's recognition, or again, lack of recognition. Jesus' parents take him up to Jerusalem for Passover, and then they start the return journey to Galilee, but do not find the child with them (Luke 2.41, 43, 45). They return, search for three days, and find him in the temple. When his parents see him, "they were astonished" (2.48). One translation of his mother's statement is, "Whatever do you think you've been doing? You've no idea what a state we've been in!"⁴ Sounds like Cleopas' outburst, "are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know...?" (24.18) The child replies, "Didn't you know? At Father's! I had to be there." The final line is, "But they did not understand what he said to them." (2.50) The beginning and the ending Luke's gospel are framed by failures of recognition, failures to understand what the prophets had foretold, what had to be. The enigmatic stranger on the road to Emmaus in chap. 24 is one with the enigmatic child in chap. 2.

I recount these three Lukan stories in a sermon, of course, because we too at times are a bit slow to recognize what is happening, what God or those whom God sends are doing in our lives or in the life of the church. One of the primary reasons Luke wrote was to persuade the church to recognize and accept persons like Cornelius (Acts 10), when many house churches (*domus* and *insulae*) were reluctant to admit uncircumcised, pork-eating pagans into their clean dining rooms (*triclinia*). We in the ELCA will eventually ordain GLBT persons, I am convinced, but our process of recognition and acceptance is painfully slow.⁵

When I arrived in Tübingen in 1966 I increasingly recognized what a great teacher Ernst Käsemann was, but I was slow to realize how much studying with him would change me. Seven years later, I did say I was slow? I left the church of my mother and went through confirmation as a Lutheran. Later as many of you know, I taught at Brite Divinity School, where we had a struggle around retaining and then tenuring a gay colleague, Steve Sprinkle. Some years into that struggle, I said, Steve, you know, I do not mean to be using you, but this struggle is changing me." When you and I recognize Christ and the tasks to which Christ calls us, we will be

³ Nuttall 8.

⁴ Nuttall 12.

⁵ For this deeper sense of "recognition," see Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

transformed. I emphasize the passive voice: we will be transformed by God. The Greek word is *metamorphosis*.

Might not you and I increase our sensitivity to what God is doing in our lives, to use a phrase out of Luke's prison break story, to "come to awareness within ourselves" (Acts 12.11)? That is one of the purposes spiritual formation groups beginning next fall, having been discussed by the student body, led by the President, Ralph Supper, along with the PLTS faculty and administration. In such groups we will listen to God and to each other, hopefully with more perception that that early prayer group in Jerusalem! (Acts 12.5, 12)

There are two more parts of this sermon, both primarily visual. First, artists have been fascinated with the moment of recognition at Emmaus. I once returned from a sabbatical in Italy to the States via London primarily in order to see a Caravaggio exhibit at the National Gallery (2005),⁶ where Caravaggio's two paintings of the recognition scene at Emmaus were displayed. The first, from the National Gallery itself, was painted in 1601. I show these two paintings, of course, because they are themselves striking, but also because they exhibit two quite different images of human beings coming to awareness. Each of us comes to greater awareness in our own way.

Caravaggio depicts the moment of recognition with explosive force. Christ reveals himself with a bold gesture of blessing as his other hand signifies the bread being consecrated. . . . The apostle at the left instinctively rises in the presence of the divine, and the one at right throws out his arms, making the form of the cross, his hands bridging darkness and light, our world and the pictures's. . . . The innkeeper serves as a foil, his expression . . . and covered head indicating his lack of understanding what is taking place. . . . The strongly tangible items on the table include the elements of the Eucharist, bread, wine, and water and a basket containing fruits that allude to the Eucharist and to the Resurrection. Bellori questioned the decorum of Caravaggio's unprecedented characterization of the Emmaus Christ as young and beardless. . . . Caravaggio shows Christ not as he appeared at the end of his life, but as young and unmarked by the Passion, which gives credibility to the apostles' recognition only through the gesture used at the Last Supper and serves to involve the viewer in the realization because we also would not readily recognize Christ without the gesture.

It is probably not good exegesis of the gospel of Luke, but Caravaggio painted the apostle on the right as Peter, whose recognition of the resurrected Christ did change him. In Greco-Roman biography, characters do not develop and change, but in Luke-Acts, Peter is not the same character in the gospel as in Acts.

Caravaggio's second painting now hangs in Milan, Italy, at the Pinacoteca di Brera and was painted in 1606, five years after the first one.

⁶ *Caravaggio: the Final Years*, eds. Silvia Cassani and Maria Sapio (Naples: Electa, 2005) 98-103, the source for my descriptions above. These two paintings are available online: Google "Caravaggio, Supper at Emmaus."

Not only has the illumination been dimmed, but all ambient light has been banished to isolate the main action in a dark void.... The composition is simplified and drawn inward. The chain of hands around the table is completed by the bread and wine.... The Eucharistic elements are here emphasized and made humble in comparison with the London version.... The exuberant theatricality ... of the London version ... [contrasts with this] Milan version, which is quieter, deeper, and more meditative.... The open hands of the apostle in the foreground are tremulous with light flickering around them.... The apostles' ... response is not explosive astonishment, but awestruck recognition.... Christ is immediately recognizable as the mature man crucified three days earlier. He becomes the eternal, blessing Christ only by the omission of any sign of his suffering.... The innkeeper is no longer boldly incredulous, but leans back pensively. Sensing the sacred moment, the old woman respectfully waits to serve the rack of lamb.... Bellori criticized Caravaggio's depiction of the disciples as vulgar..., [but] it was particularly appropriate for this subject ... of Christ's appearance at Emmaus with the Christ's poor and meek.

The third, final section of this sermon has to do with Luke's original readers / hearers, or I might say, viewers, not in Judea, of course, but in some Roman city further West. They heard the story of the crucified Christ's appearance after his resurrection in the context of Roman imperial society that caused such deaths. Rome maintained its rule partially through terror. Not only crucifixions but also amphitheater games became popular in Paul's time, that is, in Nero's time, approximately three decades before Luke wrote. In Roman society, the walls and floors of houses were decorated with frescoes and mosaics.⁷ When I first saw them, I was a straight off the dairy farm in Texas, and Roman houses struck me like museums. I will show you one fresco from the House of M. Lucretius Fronto (V 4a; PPM III 966-1029), dating from Paul's final decade. Walking to a symposium, guests passed through the atrium (2) and would see several amphitheater scenes, typically, animals killing each other, in this house an antelope running from a dog, another rearing above a dog, another attacked by a tiger, a rabbit chewed by a dog, and this one, another dog ready to pounce on an antelope.⁸ Arriving at the dining room (4), guests would no longer be surprised to see a fresco on the east wall representing Orestes with a dagger and his slave killing Neoptolemus (Achilles' son) in front of a temple of Apollo at Delphi, a scene recounted in Euripides, *Andromache* 1149-50. Roman typically painted these dramatic moments with nude bodies, so I am not showing the fresco in chapel. Romans enjoyed such dramatic scenes of violent murder in their triclinia.

This is a mosaic floor from the second century CE, destroyed on the viewers' right, from a Roman house in Tunisia, but similar to mosaic floors that one would see in Corinth or Philippi or Rome itself. Something like it might have been seen in houses where Lukan Christians lived. Circling around a crate for transporting animals are agitated leopards and panthers. In the corners

⁷ See David L. Balch, *Roman Domestic Art and Early House Churches* (WUNT: Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, in press)

⁸ PPM III 981.

of the mosaic on the left are two people condemned to being thrown to the animals. An art historian comments, “the victims of these kinds of torture would have been either prisoners of war, Christians to be martyred, or else dangerous criminals who are to be punished publicly in order to make an example of them.” A leopard chases a person in the upper left, a panther pounces on another in the lower right.

This is an earlier amphitheater scene from the House of the Ceii (I 6,15; PPM I 474) in Pompeii. This is a close-up of that scene, a lion chasing a bull, and here is another, a very popular one in Pompeii, of dogs attacking a boar. I can almost hear the boar squealing.

However shocking to us, Romans combined the theater and the amphitheater. The tragedies of Euripides involve death, and Romans staged scenes from Euripides’ plays in the amphitheater; modern historians call these “fatal charades.” A criminal or a Christian would be forced to play the role of the tragic character who died, and indeed, would actually be killed before spectators in the amphitheater. One such play was Euripides, *Antiope*. I do not have time to narrate the plot, but the climax of the play is that the evil queen, Dirce, is dragged to death by a bull. The early Christian text 1 Clement, near Luke’s date, famously narrates the deaths of Peter and Paul, and then continues, “To these men who have conducted themselves in such a holy way there has been added a great multitude of the elect, who have set a superb example among us Women were persecuted as Dircae ... and suffered terrifying and profane torments.... But they confidently completed the race of faith....” (1 Clem 6.1-2). This final image is from the House of the Granduca in Pompeii (VII 4,56; PPM VII 53), the climactic scene from this Euripidean tragedy, which Christian women were forced to enact in the late first century CE. There are nine such frescoes in Pompeii and Herculaneum.

We are often slow to perceive, to recognize what is going on in our lives, and in the life of the church where God has called us to minister. Often our slowness is due to lack of attention; we are too busy to pay attention to what is actually happening in our relationships with our family and friends, much less in the larger society. But sometimes it was not just lack of attention, but rather, the evidence points in some other direction. It would have been hard to believe that Christ, crucified by the Romans, was Lord of the cosmos. Roman military might and terror was overwhelming; further, the beauty of their art and architecture was seductive. Perhaps as the power and sufficiency of American military might comes into question, we and those to whom we preach may be able to believe that other, moral and spiritual forces are more important. Similar questions arise in Zimbabwe, in Tibet. Will the might of the Chinese military and economy defeat the Buddhist monks of Tibet? In the first three centuries of the Common Era, the power of faith in Christ as Lord of the world defeated Rome’s military and aesthetic power. The gospel text today calls us to pay close attention, to “come to ourselves” in the presence of Christ, to focus on recognizing what is actually going on in our lives of faith, in the life of the church, and in the world.