

*Keeping it strange*

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Luke 24

**Introduction:** Over this past month I've discovered many visual representations of this story found in Luke 24. For example, this one by Jan Richardson called *Emmaus*. ([www.janrichardson.com](http://www.janrichardson.com))



Luke 24 is about two people on a road—two downcast people who have just witnessed the death of Jesus. They are barely finding their way in the grief and the trauma. Then, suddenly along comes this stranger who opens up the pages of scripture for them, who sends them down a different path.

I love this abstract, mysterious, strange swirl of energy coming near, opening these disciples to a new road, a new direction.

So with this picture in front of us, hear these words from Luke 24:

“Now on that day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem... while they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

And then verse 28: “As they came near the village to which they were going, the stranger walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strong, saying “stay with us. 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 with us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

**Sermon:**

Many of us probably grew up with the message, “Don’t talk to strangers” or “stranger danger.” That wasn’t necessarily a message that caught on for me as a young girl. My parents remember the time they sat us kids down one Halloween and told us that we couldn’t accept candy from strangers. I right away asked, “What if the candy is sugarless?” We didn’t get a lot of sweet things in our house growing up so I figured that was the real danger, not the stranger.

It wasn’t until my sister and I visited my aunt living in Chicago that I learned something about stranger danger. My sister and I, having grown up in a small town, wanted to wave and smile and

talk to everyone. We were still in elementary school and so my aunt was very protective of us and would tell us to keep our heads down, I learned the phrase, “Keep a low profile.”

I felt strange keeping my head down as I rode the train, or as I walked down the street. There was so much to see and explore. And I remember being confused because here was my aunt telling us not to talk to strangers and yet at the same time she was a full-time volunteer at a Catholic Worker House in Chicago. She was feeding, talking, getting to know strangers day after day, many of whom were not the most stable people in Chicago. Now that I’m the over-protective aunt I can better understand why she was nervous to take in these small town girls for a week in the big city.

I have adored this Aunt as long as I can remember. One of the things I continue to learn from her is the art of keeping alert and aware—and not just alert for potential danger, although that is important. My aunt has cultivated the skill of noticing and staying alert through photography. She carries a camera or everywhere she goes, as I do now.

I recently found a note she sent me right before I headed to Guatemala for a summer: “Remember,” she wrote, “when you take pictures get close to the face, fill up the frame with the person. Take pictures of the small things, the things that trigger memories. Pictures of large scenic things just don’t translate when you get back. I buy postcards for the scenery- it has already been done. Take pictures of the hands that feed you lunch, or the backyard chair you sat in, or the roof top or the dog, or the kids that follow you around, or the wooden door at the corner store you won’t forget. Take pictures of your routine. Take snapshots, not photographs. Snapshots are memory triggers, not masterpieces for the wall, and are all of great value. My advice to you is to stay in the present as much as possible. Enjoy the sounds, the words, the smells, the awkwardness, notice what you are feeling, learning.”

Because of her advice and mentoring, I sometimes view stories in the Bible as these snapshots. I try to get up close and imagine the words, the sounds, the smells, the awkwardness, the strangeness of any story or text that I’m reading.

Of course you can only get so close. One person can only draw so much out of a story. I remember seminary professors urging us to allow the Bible to remain a little strange. Let it remain a little foreign. One professor gave me a great poem from Walter Brueggeman, which I promptly put in front of my Bible. It goes like this: “And now we come with this strange text, all its jots, all its points and pauses, Imagining that your splendor is reaches us in primal ways in the detail and nuance of this text, How you disclose your hidden self through open and closed syllables we do not know or comprehend. We ask for patience, alertness, discernment, and freedom...”

And so, with that let’s turn to this strange story found in Luke chapter 24.

As I mentioned these disciples on the road to Emmaus were trying to keep a low profile. They were sad, maybe a little angry. How dare these women talk about resurrection? And then this strange new reality drew near. This new strange reality drew near and drew them in and before long they were headed back to Jerusalem renewed, repurposed, believing that maybe just maybe

Jesus was alive again—alive in the breaking of bread, in the sharing of resources, in their encounters with other people, people that the world calls strange or unlovable.

It's a strange and mysterious story for sure—the way Jesus is both a stranger and a host, the way he appears and then vanishes.

There are many conclusions and interpretations one can draw from a story like. There are many questions we could ask. The questions that I have today are these: **What if they had remained closed off from receiving and learning from this stranger? What if they hadn't recognized the Risen Lord in the face and teachings of this stranger? What if the stranger would have remained a stranger?**

And here is where I want to go back to what I said at the beginning. On one level we are taught from an early age about stranger danger. We need appropriate boundaries. Safety is important. And yet so much of what we see Jesus doing in these stories, and so many of the songs we sing speak to strangers becoming friends. Over and over the Apostle Paul proclaimed: "The wall of hostility dividing peoples exists no more in Christ's love...."

And yet we live in a world where there is so much hostility, so many divisions, so much conflict. Strangers so often remain strange. And the church is in no way exempt from this conflict. In fact we often feel the conflicts quite intensely within the church. Sometimes it is we in the church creating or even intensifying conflicts.

On one hand most of us know and appreciate that difference/diversity is beautiful. Without difference the cosmos would be a formless void the writer of Genesis tells us. And yet too often humans have used power and privilege to create further difference and or to abuse difference. Those in power too often create or construct difference and build difference into system in order to create further difference...to condemn, objectify, exclude or control others. We see this happening in small ways and in large ways but it is always devastating to some when this objectification or exclusion happens.

We as open minded followers of Jesus might not see ourselves as part of the problem. We might give ourselves a nice pat on the back and be grateful that we know different. We aren't the powerful and privileged ones causing the problems.

Is this true or wishful thinking, I wonder?

I remember reading an article right before preaching my first sermon here. I was beginning to realize at that point how much work I still had to do to recognize and stay alert to my own social location, my own tendency to view the world from a relative position of power and privilege being a white, heterosexual, cis-gender, middle-class woman. I came across an article by a woman named Mary Struefert. The article is called *Affinity for Difference: A Theology of Power*. In this article Struefert argues that so-called open-minded liberal Christians aren't always very self-aware or alert to power dynamics. Too often, she says, liberals claim open-mindedness and their main way of showing hospitality is to include others, but within unaltered systems, be they institutions, communities or churches. This kind of simple inclusion, she writes, does nothing,

she argues, to acknowledge how power operates in producing others of keeping people at arm's length or in keeping the stranger strange.

Too often she sees well-meaning Christians reach out to care for the neighbor while also trying to control or define the neighbor as somehow other.

"Too often even liberals show hospitality in a way that tries to make another person as we are.... Too often the urge to care for the other is marked by the urge to control the other... Too often, without even being aware of this, we attempt to control that which is strange to us: another human being." -Struefert

"We forget," she says, "We are not the same as another person; there is no universal self to which we should appeal and by which we can know others. And so perhaps a good place to start is to acknowledge love's inability to know the other, so that we can begin to resist domination of the other."

One other thing that jumped out at me is her critique that religious communities too often remain insular. We go about our business in our little silos and don't notice those around us, those strangers around us who are sometimes working toward similar ends....sometimes even leading the way....living out the ideals that Jesus taught.

She urges religious communities to learn how to form better and lasting partnerships with diverse bodies of people and to recognize our interdependence with other institutions to create social change. "Religion has no transformative power in society writ large when its adherents act independently from other institutions. Religious communities are not solo agents in altering social ideologies of power."



I think this is valuable food for thought as we here at Rainbow work in partnership with Sharing Community in Rosedale, a non-profit organization that has evolved through the years and which is now back up and running with a full board, many of whom are from the larger community (see picture of the SCR board to the left). We have a lot of work to do to further define how the church and SCR will work both in partnership and independently as we seek similar ends-to be agents of healing and love in our world, altering views of power that would discriminate and take away

opportunity. More will be said about SCR during the congregational meeting today so I hope everyone stays and that we will all be on board as we think carefully about this partnership in the future.

In closing I want to offer some questions for reflection. As I offer these questions, I invite you to look again at the Emmaus image by Jan Richardson.

Who have we labeled or categorized as stranger?

What would it mean to draw near to the stranger and learn from them..to see the face of Christ in them..To allow them to teach us, to become the host?

These are challenging questions-ones I wrestle with-ones I hope we keep wrestling with together.

If I had to come up with a caption for the Emmaus story snapshot it would be this: God's love urges us to see, to really see that reality is not ours to control in our likeness. God is not ours to make in our likeness. We worship a God that comes to us in strange ways. Sometimes it is the stranger who is the very face of God.