



“The Power of Distraction”

Text: Luke 24:13-35

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

You can't really blame them. They had been through quite a week. Their optimism and confidence and been blown away. Three years of their lives had, apparently, gone down the drain. All that they had given up, all the time away from home, all the income that could have been produced – all gone. The nights spent on the road, the sleeplessness of lying out under the stars hoping for rest, the uncertainty of a welcome, of food, of acceptance – all for naught.

They watched as he was arrested. They ran for their lives when the temple guard came to the garden. They hid behind locked doors and only heard the accounts of the few who watched him die.

And early on the first day of the week, they just left. Where they were headed, we do not know. Perhaps back to pick up the fragments of the life from which they had walked away just three years earlier. Maybe back to make amends to wives and children and parents who had no idea of why they had gone. It could be they just had to get out of town for a while to clear their heads.

But, make no mistake: while they may have been walking forward, they were looking backward. They were locked in the past, numb to the present, and there was no foreseeable future.

And then a stranger joined them.

“What are you talking about?” the stranger asked. And out it came. Everything that had been bottled up inside them for the recent days. Their hopes, their dream, the disappointment, their disillusionment – it came pouring out like an infection being drained.

Then, the stranger began to speak. A mild admonition for their lack of faith and then a Bible study on the road. From the pages of the Torah, through the Nev'im, and the Ketuvim – the Law, the prophets, and the writings – the stranger explained what they had experienced and spoke to them such words that later they would say that their hearts burned within them as he spoke to them.

The shadows were lengthening and the evening was coming on. They were near a place to rest and eat and they invited the stranger to join them. They sat down for the evening meal. He took the bread, gave the blessing. There was a strange sense of déjà vu. They had seen this before. They had heard these words before. And then the stranger broke the bread, and gave it to them.

And they knew. They knew in an instant who this was. It was Jesus! But how could that be. Jesus was dead. But it was Jesus! They knew it. And at that very moment, they got up from the table, and risking the dangers of traveling at night, they made their way back to Jerusalem and told their brothers and sisters what had happened to them.

The obvious question is: “how did they miss it?” How did they not see Jesus immediately? How could they have not known it was Jesus, after walking down roads with him for three years?

The possibility I invite you to consider is that they were distracted. They were not present in the moment. Their thoughts and feelings were someplace else.

Enveloped in grief, the disciples were incapable of being present. It's the same feeling we might have when, after the death of a loved one, and the calling hours, and the funeral service, and the burial, we get back home and we begin asking about who was there and what had been said. Were there flowers? Did the so-and-sos show up? We don't remember, because we weren't fully there.

It is not strange that the disciples of Jesus were distracted.

And because of their distraction, they couldn't recognize Jesus.

Distractibility is a growing problem. Defined in various ways, and treated in various manners, attention deficit disorders are being diagnosed with greater accuracy and at increased rates. And it's not just children. There are plenty of adults who suffer from the various disorders as well.

The truth is that had children been diagnosed with attention deficit disorders in the 1960s, I would have been diagnosed. My wife, who is a good person, reminds me that the prayer that is associated with my personality type is, “Lord, please help me focus on this one – oh, look at the bird – thing.” It's true.

When I was a child, we often went to my grandmother's house for lunch after Sunday School and worship. I did not know at the time that my grandmother's real name was "Torquemada." But she was the grand inquisitor. So, on this particular Sunday, I knew we were going to Grammy's house for lunch and that questions would be asked. I steeled myself and took in everything during the Sunday School hour. When we got to Grammy's house, the lunch was served and the Grand Inquisitor looked at me and said, "Kevin, what did you learn in Sunday School today?" "Oh, Grammy, the lesson was about Mary and Martha and Jesus went to their house and Mary sat and talked to Jesus but Martha was in the kitchen banging the pots and pans and Jesus told her to come out and talk with him." "Well, Kevin, it sounds like you really paid attention this morning." "Grammy," I said, "I sat right down front and heard every damn word the teacher said." It was the longest Sunday afternoon of my childhood. I do not recall sitting much of that afternoon. In my defense, it was a word I had heard from my father and my mother - and even from Grandmother Torquemada.

Still, it's not just the medically diagnosed distractibility. Our world has become a place of increased distraction.

Technology, for all its blessings, has increased the probability that we will be distracted. We don't go anywhere without our pocket screen that offers us instantaneous distraction. Truth be told, we count on the distraction of our screens.

Work can be a distraction. We put more and more into the job and we lose focus on other things - things like family, friends, and more. We get distracted by the job and soon can't seem to find the other places of our lives.

Worrying can be a huge distraction. How many times have you talked with someone who catalogues every worry and anxiety? And how many times do you walk away, after listening, and can't be absolutely sure that they even knew you were there?

There are so many distractions that entice us and seduce us that the truth is that we are rarely present. Don't look down on those disciples on the Emmaus Road for missing Jesus when he walked right up to them. Had we been there, we probably would have missed it too.

The challenge, of course, is to become present. The challenge for each of us is to limit the distractions of life so that we can experience life. Each of us and all of us need ways to put the distractions aside and come into the present moment and experience the gift of life that God has given us.

Sometimes it means just turning things off. Whatever screen saps most of your time, just turn it off. Be present at your meals. Be present with your family and friends and colleagues. Be present at your work. Be present at your play.

Sometimes it means changing your surroundings. The time of year to spend time outdoors is here. Take a walk or a hike. Take in the beauty of the created order. Plant a garden and watch the mystery of growing things unfold.

Sometimes it means spending time with another, not to list your ailments and complaints, but to genuinely connect. Take time to listen to another. Enter into their joys and sorrows. Open your heart, even when that means risking that your heart may be broken.

As we become present – as we live in the right now – we may discover the most amazing thing of all: that God is with us – right here, right now. We don't have to be like those disciples on the road who, in the midst of their enormous distractions, missed Jesus walking with them. Learning to limit our distractions, we may discern the presence of God with us – right here, right now.

As we become present – as we live in this moment – we can begin to discover that faith and trust are joys to be celebrated now, instead of impossible goals to be achieved some day. As we enter into the present moment, we find authentic life – not the “to do list” that passes for life, not the empty existence that pretends to be life. As we enter into the here-and-now, we can discover that God is with us – walking along the road with us – and that new life is right here and right now.

Don't be too hard on those early morning walkers on their way to Emmaus. There was a lot going on in their lives. The distractions were like trees in a forest, obscuring everything else. It is completely understandable that they would miss Jesus walking along with them.

But their story does not have to be our story. We can learn from their story. We can discover new ways to stay present – so that we don't miss the presence of God in our lives.

The power of distraction is real and it is strong. Resist it. Subdue it. Reject it.

Live in the awareness of new life. Live in the knowledge of God's presence and love. Be awake to all that God has done, is doing, and promises to do.

Don't miss a single thing.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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