

GOING TO EMMAUS (Luke 24:13-35)

It amazes me how many people know exactly what Jesus looked like. There aren't any photographs of him, of course, unless you believe the Shroud of Turin is a kind of photographic image. There weren't any sketch artists among his disciples. And it's not just Jesus. A lot of people know what his mother looked like, too. They see Jesus and Mary in grilled cheese sandwiches and cloud formations and rocks and tree rings.

There's actually a word for this kind of thing. It's *pareidolia*, which Wikipedia defines as "a psychological phenomenon involving a vague and random stimulus (often an image or sound) being perceived as significant." The image doesn't have to be religious; the man in the moon is an example of pareidolia. But Jesus and Mary sightings get the attention. eBay even has a market for items like this.

I've seen photos and some of these images do look vaguely human. But how anyone can immediately know for sure it's Jesus or Mary is what bewilders me, because no one who encountered the risen Christ recognized him at first. There was something about him that didn't register with those who had known Jesus before Easter.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus walked with Jesus for a couple of miles and they didn't recognize him. It was only when he came into their house and shared a meal with them that they realized who this stranger was. As Luke, says Jesus broke the bread and "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight" (Lk 24:31).

The risen Christ is an elusive figure, impossible to pin down or hold in one place. Just when you recognize him, he's gone, only to turn up centuries later on a grilled cheese sandwich.

All too often, I'm afraid, we're a lot like those disciples on the road to Emmaus – blind to the reality of the risen Christ in our midst, unable to recognize him even when we meet him face-to-face. If we can't recognize Christ, it's hard to live a Christ-like life. If we can't recognize Christ, it's hard to follow as a disciple.

The UCC doesn't have saints, but if we did, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would be one, maybe the only person ever to achieve sainthood by setting out consciously and intentionally to commit a sin. Bonhoeffer's sin was joining the conspiracy to kill Adolf Hitler. He was a pacifist who became convinced that assassinating Hitler was the only way to rid Germany of the scourge of Nazism.

The plot didn't succeed, of course. Bonhoeffer and the other conspirators were arrested and thrown in prison, and Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenbergr prison just two weeks before the Allies liberated it.

Assassins don't often get beatified. But what makes Bonhoeffer different is that he never tried to fool himself into believing that what he set out to do wasn't wrong. He knew it was wrong. But he acted on the principle that doing

the responsible thing in this world sometimes means incurring guilt. He said that sometimes the greatest sin is avoiding sin. He understood what Martin Luther meant when he said, "Sin boldly and trust in God." That's what makes this would-be murderer a candidate for sainthood.

I thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer this week when the news broke that Osama bin Laden had been killed, and I wondered what he might say. He might have agreed it was the responsible thing to do as a measure of justice for 9/11. But I can't imagine him celebrating like it was a Superbowl victory.

Saints are supposed to show us what it means to be faithful, what a Christ-like life looks like. In answer to the question that was so popular a few years ago, "What would Jesus do?" Bonhoeffer answered that in Nazi Germany, Jesus himself would have joined the plot to kill Hitler.

Bonhoeffer wrestled with that decision because there's no black-and-white answer to the question "What would Jesus do?" The fact that there aren't easy answers is what keeps Christian ethicists in business.

Back in Coventry we used a film about Bonhoeffer in confirmation class. After the confirmands had watched it, their assignment was to imagine that they were living in Germany in 1939 and a friend asked them to join the plot against Hitler, and then to write a letter explaining why they would or wouldn't join. Their letters were full youthful idealism. Most said they would join, and their reasoning was straightforward: The end justified the means; Hitler was so evil that he needed to be gotten rid of at any cost.

What they didn't appreciate was how hard it is to turn brave words into risky action. Nazi Germany is a case study in how hard it is to live a Christian life and stand up for what's right against all sorts of social pressure. The vast majority of German Christians ignored what was happening to Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and all the other "undesirables." The vast majority tolerated the idolatrous worship of Hitler. Only a small minority that became known as the Confessing Church recognized and opposed what was going on. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, along with Karl Barth and Martin Niemöller, was one of the leaders, of that "righteous remnant" that kept the faith in Hitler's Germany.

As early as 1934 they saw what was going on and issued the famous Barmen Declaration, which repudiated Nazi claims and asserted that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

It's interesting that Bonhoeffer developed some of his insights while he was studying in the U.S. at Union Seminary. He was moved by the exuberant worship at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. But he came to see the cushions on the pews of most American churches – something they didn't have in Germany – as a metaphor for a church that had grown complacent in the face of suffering, that valued comfort more than commitment to the gospel.

Bonhoeffer's friends at Union begged him not to go back to Germany. But he was convinced that he had to go back if he wanted to have any part in rebuilding Germany after the war. So he went back, lived as he believed his faith compelled him to, and died for it.

While he was in prison, Bonhoeffer wrote scores of letters. In one to his friend Eberhard Bethge he wrote: "All that we may rightly expect from God, and ask him for, is to be found in Jesus Christ. The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with what God, as we imagine him, could do and ought to do. If we are to learn what God promises, and what he fulfills, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, suffering, and death of Jesus."

In other words, an abstract belief in God isn't nearly enough. A lived faith requires personal encounter with the risen, life-giving Christ, the kind of encounter those disciples had on Easter afternoon on the road to Emmaus.

Of course they believed in Jesus as they trudged toward Emmaus. They had some ideas about him. But at that point there was nothing personal at stake in their belief. It was only when their eyes were opened and they recognized who he was that their hearts burned within them. Then they could become authentic disciples.

In his most famous book *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer wrote: "Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship... and a Christianity of that kind is nothing more or less than the end of discipleship. In such a religion there is trust in God, but no following of Jesus Christ."

This is anything but easy, and it's wrong to pretend that it is easy. But if we want to follow Jesus and be disciples, we have to walk in his steps and live fully in this world with all its problems and challenges, just as he did.

Bonhoeffer is remembered and will be remembered, not for the books he wrote (important as they are) but because of the life he lived and the witness he bore to the power of the living Christ.

As we walk our own roads to Emmaus, wherever Emmaus may be, may we recognize risen Christ in our midst, may our hearts burn within us, and may we find faith and courage to follow in the steps of our Savior. And may the world see Christ in the lives we live.