

## “The Emmaus Road”

*Luke 24:13-35*

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This morning, we find ourselves transported back to Easter evening. The same day that the women found the stone rolled away in the early morning hours. The same day that the men in dazzling clothes said to those same women, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The same day that those same women raced back to tell the disciples and the disciples didn’t believe the women – the women’s words seemed to them “an idle tale.” The same day Peter heard their little tale and went to see for himself and indeed found the linen cloths lying there and so he went home dumbstruck and amazed. This is the evening we find ourselves in today. Don’t you imagine this was the longest day in the history of long days? I can’t believe that Cleopas and his companion have decided to make the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus – a seven mile walk – on the same evening that all these things have happened, the same evening that their deep grief has mingled with the disbelief of this fantastic tale delivered by some women. We don’t know why these two disciples are headed to Emmaus, but to Emmaus they are headed. And we are headed with them.

This walk to Emmaus is unremarkable in a certain sense: the gospel of Luke is positively full of journeys and long walks, and Jesus has spent his whole ministry in Luke’s gospel jumping from one venture-on-foot to the next. But this walk is remarkable in another sense, because *Jesus isn’t here anymore*. These disciples have lost their beloved friend and teacher, and they are living in what theologian Shelly Rambo calls that strange “middle space” of trauma, that deep Holy Saturday pit of grief. And many of us have been there, too, at this point on the Emmaus walk. Not exactly, of course, but we too have visited the Holy Saturday space of grieving and tears and utter confusion. This is the very beginning of a walk unlike any of the walks that have come before or after it. This is the walk you take in the wee hours of the morning when your spinning anxiety has you unable to sleep. This is the walk you take in the late-night fog when the tears will not stop. This is the walk you take when you are confused, or when you are alone, or when you are disappointed. This is the Emmaus walk. *Jesus is dead*, and some women have told a *story* but we are not so *sure* about the story, and now there is just the walking and talking, walking and talking.

And then a man appears on the road. The man sees them in their walking and talking, and he wants to know what they're talking about. They stop their walking now, because how could this stranger not have heard what has happened in these past days? We have been *here*, too, at this point in the Emmaus walk. This is the place where we cannot possibly believe that there is anyone we might encounter who is not in this pit of grief or confusion or anxiety with us, who has not heard of the events that just took place to spin us into this place of walking and talking, walking and talking. So, these unnamed disciples stop dead in their tracks and fill this stranger in. "We're talking," they say, "about Jesus of Nazareth, our friend and teacher and mighty prophet, and about how our leaders condemned him to death and hung him on a cross to die. *But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*"

"But we had hoped." We have surely all been here, at this point on the Emmaus walk. But we had hoped that the test would come back clear. But we had hoped that we'd get that promotion. But we had hoped that we'd get to have a prom this year, or graduation, or Confirmation (which we should be celebrating today). But we had hoped that our community wouldn't be affected by this pandemic, that our family wouldn't be affected, that we would find ourselves somehow unaffected. But we had hoped. These two disciples on the Emmaus road had hoped, too, that this man Jesus, whom they had loved to the very end, would be the one to redeem Israel. And we hear the words they don't say: "but I guess we were wrong." Then they tell this stranger about the very odd tale that these women have told them about how the body of their beloved one is supposedly not in the tomb anymore. We can almost *taste* their puzzlement, and their sadness. What a very strange few days.

But this stranger on the Emmaus walk starts to join in on the walking and talking now. And his talking isn't quite like the disciples' - he's interpreting scripture. He's telling all about how the Messiah, the longed-for-one, was always meant to suffer and die and then enter into glory. He's talking about Moses and the prophets and all the sacred texts the disciples have known for so long. The stranger talks for a long time. The walking and talking is becoming tiresome, and the sun keeps sinking deeper into the horizon. But this stranger has sparked something within the disciples. They are intrigued. And he's starting to turn to walk in another direction; he's giving them an "out" so they don't have to keep up the walking and talking with him, but they realize it's important somehow that he stay. "Stay with us," the disciples say, "because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over!" And so the stranger does.

The stranger stays, and sits at table, and takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples. And it is in this very ordinary act, this everyday occurrence of eating bread at the table, that these two disciples finally – finally! – recognize that it is their risen Lord who is seated with them. This is no stranger. This is no random skilled conversationalist with a remarkable knowledge of scripture. No, this is the longed-for-one, the Messiah, the beloved leader and teacher and friend. And in this moment of recognition in this very ordinary task of sharing bread, the risen Lord vanishes. As quickly as he arrived on our Emmaus walk, he is gone. And these disciples are quick to take a page out of *the women's* book; they spring up from their seats, tear out the door, and bound back to Jerusalem to tell everyone what has just happened. “The Lord has risen indeed!” Indeed.

And *this* is the part of the Emmaus journey that we are invited into this Easter season: this final scene that speeds by in a flash, so quick you’ll miss it if you blink. God invites us into this story of hospitality and recognition and witness, this story where all of a sudden, the stranger becomes the host. We are invited into this moment where the disciples recognize their resurrected friend in the most mundane of places, in the breaking of ordinary bread. At the end of a long, hard, confusing day of walking and talking, walking and talking, it is not in the walking and talking but the *eating* that they see the risen Lord for who he is.

This is what happens every time we gather around our Communion table to receive the holy meal together. Stranger becomes host, and our eyes are opened in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup. We are nourished in our very bodies by the one who breaks the bread within and among us. In the sacrament we recognize Jesus – we come to know more of him, the generous host, the fulfillment of all our longings, the source and goal of all the gifts of our lives. At this table, Christ is made known to us in the breaking of the bread, and what an enormous gift.

But you’re probably listening to me and thinking, or saying out loud to someone in your house, “yeah, and it really stinks that we aren’t able to gather at that table right now.” Yeah. It is for some of us the single most disappointing reality of our being away from one another in body during this strange season of our lives. I think often of you who love the sacrament of Communion – especially our 8:30 worshipers who have likely come to long for the bread of life and the cup of salvation every Sunday morning, and from whom that bread and cup are now withheld. We just can’t be church in the way we’re used to right now, and that is hard. For some of you, it may not be the bread of Communion that you’re longing for, but the music of the Rejoice band and choir and organ, or the laughter in the children’s ministry hallway, or the hugs of greeting before Church School. These are the places where Christ is made known to us, where we have come to expect that the crucified and risen one will dwell with us, where we know that

our eyes will be opened and we will recognize Jesus. And it is right for us to expect that Christ will be there, because he has promised to be there and Christ is faithful to his promises.

But if we keep walking with the disciples on this Emmaus road, we come to find that Christ is also made known to us in the most ordinary of places. If we keep up our walking and talking, we find that after the walking and talking, there is eating...and not just eating, but *feasting*. We might find that in the chaos of having the kids home from school – God bless you, families with little ones – God shows up in little moments of laughter and silliness at the end of a long day. We might find that in the solitude of life alone – God bless you, folks who live by yourselves – God shows up in the silence of our own hearts. We might all find that in the uncertainty of this season, the mystery of God is made known to us more clearly. The resurrection sure didn't look how Jesus's community thought it would look: there was no triumph and fanfare; just a rolled away stone and some women and some angels with a strange message. A holy mystery.

In this Easter season, we remember that when Jesus came back from the dead, he bore the wounds of his crucifixion. He did not rise in a glorious, beautiful, blemish-less body; he rose with scars and wounds in his hands and side. We know that this is true thanks to the lovely and vulnerable witness of Thomas in the gospel of John. What an incredible reminder that Jesus is alongside us on this Emmaus journey, this road of confusion and recognition and feeding and witness. The one who is the very Bread of Life is the same one who walks alongside us, bearing the marks of his own resilience and vulnerability. This is the Jesus who is made known to us this season as we journey apart from one another in body but united in spirit and witness. And so as we continue to walk and talk as a community, together but apart, may we recall that Christ walks alongside us in this journey, and he is made known to us in acts as ordinary as the breaking of the bread. Blessings to each of you as you travel alongside one another and continue to be Church, even in the strangest of times. After all, the disciples on the Emmaus road were in the midst of the strangest of times, too, and that's where the risen Christ showed up. Amen.