

### The Road to Emmaus: Luke 24:13-35

In our text this morning we've gone back in time two weeks: it's Easter afternoon again, and we find ourselves walking the Road to Emmaus in the company of two grieving, despairing disciples.

The past few days have been pretty traumatic for the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. They still remember the day they dropped everything to follow the charismatic, wonder-working Jesus through the country. They still have stars in their eyes from the miracles they had seen him perform: the sick made well, the blind given new sight, the dead brought to life. Okay, so they didn't understand everything he said, all of his cryptic sayings, or the parables that left the disciples scratching their beards. But had been so *sure* that he was their Messiah. Cleopas in our text this morning says, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." But when the dream became a nightmare, those hopes died fast. They watched as their long-awaited Savior was handed over for crucifixion and death. Perhaps Cleopas had even had the nerves to stand among the angry, jeering mob and watch his Savior suffer – or perhaps he lost his lunch at the sight and went home to weep in his wife's arms.

Fast-forward three days, to the setting of our story. It's the morning we now call Easter; but Cleopas doesn't know it's Easter yet. To Cleopas, it's just a strange, sad, bewildering morning. And frankly, he doesn't think he can take any more. The women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James) had been to the tomb early that morning, only to discover that Jesus's body was gone. Cleopas doesn't know what to make of their story. Cleopas doesn't know what to make of anything anymore.

I imagine a broiling hot, dusty Jerusalem afternoon with the sun beating down hard as our two heroes - Cleopas and an unnamed companion - make their way out of the city to walk the 7 miles of countryside to the village of Emmaus. I imagine their enormous relief just to be getting out of there. I imagine that Cleopas shakes the dust from his sandals with a huge sigh of relief as soon as they exit the city gates.

The text describes them "looking sad", but I doubt that "sad" really captures all that they were feeling that morning. Devastated? Hopeless? Despairing? So utterly crushed with disappointment that Cleopas could barely find the will to get out of bed that morning,

even though Cleopas's wife was standing next to the bed with a steaming mug of coffee?

Does that sound familiar to any of you this morning, my brothers and sisters? Can you recognize Cleopas's despair as your own? The road from Jerusalem to Emmaus is only 7 miles long, but some of us have been walking the road of despair for a long, long time. When you're feeling like Cleopas - feeling like all of your dreams have just died a brutal death - the road to Emmaus can feel like it will never end.

A few miles into the journey, a stranger falls into step beside Cleopas, and the band of two becomes a trio. Unbelievably, this stranger doesn't seem to have heard the latest Jerusalem news. I mean, where has this guy been? Has he been living in a cave? Does he need to clean the sand out of his ears with a Q-tip? "Haven't you heard about all these things?" asks Cleopas in wonder. I somehow imagine that the travelling stranger cocks his head to the side with a mysterious twinkle in his eye. "What things?" he asks innocently.

Of course, we know something that Cleopas doesn't know, because the Gospel lets us in on the secret. We know that this journeying stranger is none other than the risen savior – yes, Jesus himself. But Cleopas doesn't recognize his Lord, not even when Jesus's sandals are keeping step with his own on the road to Emmaus, not even when they're sharing a rest stop under the welcome shade of a solitary olive tree, or wiping the sweat from their brows with the sleeves of their tunics. We aren't told why not. But perhaps Cleopas is simply too confused, too depressed, or too busy crying and contemplating his sandal straps to recognize that his Lord is alive and walking beside him.

What's worse, Cleopas remains clueless even when his new-found companion launches into a full-blown theological explanation. Our text tells us that "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them *all* the things about himself in *all* the scriptures." Cleopas gets a very thorough theological schooling on the 7-mile road to Emmaus.

But the eyes of Cleopas's heart are *still* not opened. His risen Savior is walking beside him to Emmaus – and offering an enviable theological education along the way. But Cleopas still doesn't know Jesus for who he is. What will it take, brothers and sisters?

What will it take for Cleopas's heart to wake up to the reality that the risen savior is already walking the road beside him? What will it take for Cleopas to lift up his downcast eyes and see, really see, that his Savior lives?

The story could end here, couldn't it? The physical journey ends in Emmaus, after all. Cleopas and his companion have reached their final destination. They could so easily have thanked the stranger for the pleasant conversation and bid him good night. "*Thanks for the company! Maybe we'll see you around these parts sometime!*" But they don't. The road ends in Emmaus, but the story doesn't.

Seeing that night is fast falling and that the stranger intends to travel still further in the dark – a dangerous idea – they invite him in. "They urged him *strongly*," says the text. "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."

Remember that they're weary and traumatized, our two disciples. They are probably in no mood for company, for setting out cheese and crackers and opening a bottle of good wine. They probably just want to eat bad take-out Chinese and drop into their beds to get some sleep and escape their memories of the last few days. But they've got a somewhat clueless stranger in their midst (and he *is* still a stranger to them, isn't he? - because after all, what are 7 miles to get to know someone?), and in these dangerous, unpredictable times, when the whole city is full of strangers and you don't know whose side your neighbor is on, these two disciples urge a complete stranger into their home to experience radical hospitality.

The gesture of radical hospitality is in this case- in many cases - the overture to the moment of revelation. When I hear Cleopas turn the key in the lock, open the door to the wandering stranger, and offer him a seat at his table, I swear I can hear angels tuning their instruments in the background. The air is thick with anticipation. I actually get goosebumps on my arms when I get to verse 28. Because whenever a stranger is welcomed in with open arms in the Bible, mysterious things start to happen. Human hospitality is often the gateway through which the divine enters into the human world. Think of Abraham and Sarah's visitors near the Oaks of Mamre, of Lot's radical hospitality to the angels, or the widow's welcome to Elijah in 1 Kings. Think of the Nazareth innkeeper who offered his stable to a pregnant teenager, or of Priscilla, who

welcomes Paul in to her home in the book of Acts. Whenever we invite a wandering stranger to take a place at our table, the divine plot thickens.

So what happens? In verse 29 it says “he went in to stay with them.” How disappointed we are with this unassuming little sentence at the moment when we are expecting a burning bush! But let’s read it again together: So *he* (the risen Savior, the Messiah, the resurrected Son of God who has only been alive again since that morning) *went in* (entered the humble human realm and chose to be present there) *to stay* (to remain and abide and dwell) *with them* (with our sad, tired, hungry & sweaty human heroes). Within the humble words “so he went in to stay with them” is disguised a rich and radical divine visitation. *God has shown up.*

Seated at the common table with Cleopas and Co., Jesus takes, blesses, and breaks the bread. You can hear a clear echo, can’t you? It was only four days ago that Jesus and his disciples had gathered in the upper room to celebrate the Passover meal: “Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

The breaking and blessing of bread is the exact same symbolic act that took place in the upper room in Jerusalem on Thursday night, but it would not be an exaggeration to say that the most important event in all of human history has taken place in the meantime. Jesus repeats the same symbolic act - but *oh, how the context has changed!* Christ’s breaking of his own body at the last supper on Thursday, foreshadowing death, is transformed on Sunday into a symbol of resurrected life.

On Sunday, the “clueless wandering stranger” assumes his rightful place as the host of the banquet of everlasting life. The joke’s on Cleopas, isn’t it? Cleopas thought he was offering a meal and a bed to a travelling stranger, but instead the risen Christ passed over the threshold and entered in. Cleopas thought he had to put out the canapés and entertain a houseguest for the evening, but he was about to be invited to the feast of eternal life.

I imagine a simply furnished dining room where Jesus stands, leaning across the table, and reaches for the bread basket with a twinkle in his eye. I imagine the true host making eye contact with his honored guests at the feast of salvation.

When Jesus' hands extend across the table to offer the bread of life – when the truth comes shining on through, piercing the darkness in Cleopas's heart for once and for all – Cleopas and his companion must have felt that their very reality was blown wide open. “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him,” reads our text. The two despairing disciples whose dreams had died not three days ago lift up their eyes to find their resurrected Lord extending to them the bread of eternal life.

**Sisters and brothers, the feast is this morning. It is every morning.** Did you stumble into church this morning fresh off the road to Emmaus? Did you come in with downcast eyes and a troubled soul, full of doubts, feeling like every dream is dead? Have you, like Cleopas, lately been unable to see that your Savior walks beside you on the journey? Then it's time to raise up your eyes and see that your Savior lives.

He is standing at the table – not just at this table in the sanctuary, but at the table in your dining room, your workplace lunchroom, the local drinking hole, the café where you meet for coffee – he is standing with his arms outstretched, offering the bread of life. Take and eat, friends. This feast is this morning and every morning.

Cleopas's story is rich with meanings and possibilities, and I don't know what spoke to you this morning. I've only been able to tell you what God whispered in my heart as I lived, breathed and dreamed this text:

- That the living Savior always walks beside us on the long journey of despair - even we are too sad to lift up our eyes and see his radiance.
- That the divine gesture of welcome is *a/ways* calling us to the table to feast on eternal life.
- And that our risen Savior is here, now, this very morning and every morning, offering us the bread of life in his outstretched hands and inviting us to take, eat, and live.

**Let us pray:**

Lord Jesus, come in and stay with us.

Be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts and awaken our hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in scripture, in the breaking of bread, and in the stranger in our midst.

Grant this for the sake of your love. Amen.