

Growing up and spending all of my school-age years at a Lutheran Church called Emmaus, when I encounter this story, I more or less assume that everyone knows this story and all of the details of *The Walk to Emmaus* as well as I do. As I say that though, I realize that there are good things and not-so-good things to being very familiar with a story. A good thing is that when you hear it, it's a bit like pulling on your favorite sweatshirt, it makes you feel warm and comfortable. A not-so-good thing with a very familiar story is that you can miss details or interesting things about it because you seldom stop to think all that much about it.

For example, I have only rarely given much thought to who these two disciples were — one is named Cleopas and the other? well, we don't even catch his name. We are told that they are a part of the group that was astounded by the story the women told who had gone to the tomb early on Easter morning. So while they are not outsiders at all, why is it we have never heard of them before this? How or why is it that *they(!)* receive a personal appearance of the risen Lord? Maybe the only explanation that makes at least some sense is that Jesus appears to them precisely because they weren't that important in the whole scheme of things.

Lest we forget, Jesus came into the world through an ordinary, unimportant peasant girl named Mary, he was not born into a royal family. And of course when Jesus was born(?) — it wasn't the wealthy or the elite who were the first to hear the message and come to the manger, the message was given to shepherds. Much later, when it came time for Jesus to choose who would be his closest followers? He sought out a bunch of guys who were not well known, well-bred, studious, or even well-respected people. And who did Jesus teach and heal and eat with? Plain ol' regular people. We also know that he included women among his followers at a time when this just wasn't done. So now that Jesus has been raised from the dead, we really shouldn't be surprised to learn that he encounters, and teaches, and eats with regular people. It's what he loved to do. It's very much who he is.

Another thing that I never thought about much was how curious it is that this Easter evening scene happens on the way to a village called Emmaus. As I said, because of attending a church by that name, in my mind, everyone has heard of Emmaus. But in reality? It's not a place where anything has happened previously. This is the first we hear of it. It's in this seemingly nowhere place that these seemingly unimportant people walk straight into the risen Jesus. And you know what? That's not by accident. This story is emphasizing once again that Jesus meets ordinary people in ordinary places.

Now if you really want to, there's nothing wrong with going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land or taking a tour to trace the journeys of the Apostle Paul. When this pandemic is finally behind us, I am certain that many people will take a trip to Germany or to Rome or to Nepal or Mecca or wherever it is that people might want to go these days to get closer to God. But what is so beautiful about this story is it tells us quite unequivocally that Jesus will meet us where we are, and especially in out of the way places when we aren't expecting to see him. Luke tells us that these two disciples are walking to a village about seven miles from Jerusalem. It is difficult for us to know what it is that keeps their eyes from recognizing Jesus as he walks right alongside them. But even though they had heard reports that he was alive, they were walking and talking and feeling sad, and certainly with many other raw emotions. We imagine that they were leaving Jerusalem, not to tell anyone else about the news of the missing body, or with the hope that this meant he had been raised from the dead, but with nothing but tremendous disappointment and loss.

Very often when life hits us with something that leaves us stunned or grieving one of our reactions is, "I just need to leave this place. I need to get away. I can't stay here with all the memories, it's too painful." So it is quite possible that these disciples are experiencing this sort of reaction. When we are feeling like that emotionally, do we expect to encounter Jesus? There may be some part of us that might be hoping for it, but most likely, we are feeling abandoned. We are left running through some of the countless

why questions that never seem to get answered in any kind of satisfying way. Why me? Or, Why *not* me instead of my loved one? Why now? Why like this?

Into these moments, Jesus will come and meet you. On your walk to your Emmaus, your place of escape. And he will likely listen to you, come alongside you, and feel your pain. But then he just might also say, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” He likely won’t use those exact words but it’s possible that we might be pushed to look more deeply into God’s Word. It’s all there. The promises, the *agape* love, the forgiveness, the self-giving on God’s part.

But how will we know all these things if we don’t place a great deal of importance on God’s Word? As we spend time reading and learning, we would see that most all of prophets of God (like Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, to name a few), whenever they confront the powerful elite, they are inevitably rejected. And yet, through suffering, God works out God’s purposes. While it’s not how we might like it drawn up, we cannot fathom why suffering would ever be necessary, but it is God’s way. Jesus will enter his glory, he will establish God’s rule, of that, the Scriptures testify. Way back in chapter nine of Luke, Jesus said, “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels” (26). Jesus knew it back then and foretold that he must suffer and die and that he would rise from the dead — but even his closest followers didn’t get it. And we can hardly blame them. It isn’t an easy thing to understand. It runs counter to how we’d like things to work. We’d much rather push an easy button than have to go through the pain and suffering to reach the goal.

Now we come to the part of story where the walk to Emmaus ends and, we presume, the Bible lesson Jesus was sharing with these two disciples comes to an end also. Still, however, they have not recognized him. Nevertheless, they are gracious hosts and they strongly urge him to stay with them. We just might be reminded of when the

Apostle Paul urges the Christians in Rome to “Extend hospitality to strangers.” And/or, the even more familiar line in Hebrews, chapter thirteen, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Well, this turns out to be an even more dramatic surprise as we hear, “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.” This was no angel, they discover that they had been hanging out, walking, and eating with Jesus!

The language of the revelation, in which Jesus ‘takes bread, blessed, broke, and gave’ is the same as the feeding of the five thousand and it is the same as the Last Supper. This again is not by accident. Here we are provided with another meal scene like so many others wherein God’s purposes are revealed to us. God’s presence is made real through Jesus and Jesus is the one who gives us a foretaste of that future completion of God’s will in which everyone will have a seat at the banquet table of the Lord. But what may be most remarkable about this story is not that it gives us a glimpse into that future when we will see him, when our eyes will be opened. What is the most remarkable is how this the story shows us that we can see him now, already. We need not rely only on a future fulfillment of the promise!

When these two disciples realize who they had been with all this time, that same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem. There was no holding them back from telling others what they had experienced. Jesus made himself known to them in the breaking of the bread! So my hope is that each time we gather and hear how Jesus takes bread, blesses, breaks, and gives the bread and the wine we know that he is truly present among us. And my hope and prayer is that we not only recognize him in this time of Holy Communion but that we see him and recognize Jesus on all of our roads to Emmaus. May Jesus’ living presence give us energy and courage to witness to others about Christ, crucified, died and risen. So let us celebrate: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, alleluia!

Amen

Narrative3.2 Luke 24:13-35 April 21, 2021

Pastor Jonathan Zielske