

August 27, 2023

**The Gospel of Luke**  
**LXXI. Open Eyes, Open Hearts**  
**Luke 24:13-35**

Dr. Christina S. Gravely  
Easley Presbyterian Church  
Easley, South Carolina

Today we journey along with two followers of Jesus—true believers—gloomily meandering down a well-worn path headed out of Jerusalem to a town called Emmaus. Our passage says they were talking about all that had happened over the last few weeks: Jesus being drawn into the conspiracy by his enemies. His arrest and trial. Humiliation. And his horrific death. While Roman soldiers paced back and forth seething in anger, formidable Jesus hung on a cross and died.

A crushing experience for the community who had gathered around Jesus. An experience of profound personal loss for each one who believed he was their Savior. They had come to love the man, this good, exciting, compelling, and yet humble teacher who seemed to so love the world, and them, that everything was fresh and new.

And now, Jesus was dead. There was no doubt about that. And with him had died the hope and faith of his disciples. The finality of his crucifixion had brought a devastating end to their growing sense that what he said was true, that he was the way and the truth and the life. In his presence they were somehow in the presence of God. But all of that ended when he died on a Friday afternoon.

And so these disconsolate followers of Jesus were walking and talking and processing grief when, all of a sudden, a stranger shows up right beside them. They didn't recognize him or even notice that he was coming up from behind them, but he does and asks, "Whatever in the world are you talking about?"

Hmmm. I can just picture in my mind's eye their unbelief. Maybe they furrowed their brows and cocked their heads to one side. Maybe one rolled his eyes and looked at the other with a questioning stare. Perhaps they laughed at the man who had obviously been out of town, off in the hinterlands, or under a rock somewhere. Incredulous, they ask him: "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know about the things that have happened?" Apparently not, because this stranger says, "What things?"

Thus begins a long conversation. These two grieving Jesus followers tell the man the events of the last few days, the most important being that Jesus—the one in whom they had placed all their hopes—DIED. Was crucified and placed into a tomb. But that wasn't even the highpoint of

the weekend's news. There was this rumor that he was alive! No longer in the tomb. Walking and talking.

And the man replies. I think this might be one of the most important paradigm shifts in all of scripture. The stranger becomes the storyteller who scolds them just a bit: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"

Most translators state that Jesus is really not being that hard on them, that calling them foolish was more like a soft reproach than chastisement. It was Jesus saying something like: "Oh bless. Bless your sweet little hearts. Let me start from the very beginning." And so, he did.

Jesus recounted for them the ancient story of God's creative and guiding hand at work in creation and around in the world: in stories of human struggles, getting lost and being found, oppression and liberation, stories of poverty of heart and the meaning of true abundance, stories of heartbreak and of soaring joy, of true and abiding life. He helped them remember.

Remember how the Lord had led his people through the deep waters and to the Promised Land and even gave them the strength to live when they had nothing left but disappointment and disgust. Jesus emphatically reminds them that God had been present with them always and that he wasn't going anywhere ever again. Jesus brings the story of God's never-failing love for his people forward in time, right up to this dusty road of sadness between Jerusalem and Emmaus.

When evening was drawing near the trio came close to the village. The stranger was set to leave his companions and carry on down the road, but the two were not ready to part from him and so they invited him to stay with them in their home. They sat down for dinner and that is when the stranger took bread...he blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to his friends. "Amen." But here's where the story pivots. A light bulb moment of great proportion. Eyes wide open they now see, perceive: *Gasps!* "Jesus?! It's YOU! How...when...what...?"

And then without explanation or footnote, Jesus is gone from their sight.

Looking at each other, in retrospect, the two recognized that the encounter on the road to Emmaus was no ordinary bump into a stranger. The Word of God had come to life on that dusty road as Jesus reminded them of God's creative and guiding hand at work in the world. The risen Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of bread at the table. Noticing became perceiving, seeing led to believing, and hearts started burning.

In the action of blessing, breaking, giving, and receiving...the circle was complete and even the old stories took on new meaning. Jesus had said all the time: "for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, may they see and hear." Well, this is what he meant. They comprehend. Comprehension is way more than a glance. Open eyes and burning hearts are the result of eyes open to see and ears open to hear. The foolish become wise. Grieving hearts receive new hope.

The Emmaus Road was no longer the road of broken hearts. It was now the distance between the sacred story and the sacrament of the table. Between fractured lives and new possibilities.

And for us, the Emmaus Road is the journey we all travel as we make our way here to worship, carrying the stuff of our brokenness and of our tattered hopes, through these doors to hear again, week after week, the sacred Word that has been passed down through the generations. We, too, make the journey to the gathered table that we may encounter the risen Christ in the reading and proclamation of the stories of God and also in the feast of the Lord's Supper.

But what to do now? The two must make a decision: to trust this new reality, this amazing possibility, or to continue what they were doing, to proceed with their grief-ridden journey and stay away from the tragedy and heartbreak in Jerusalem.

They decide to trust. They turn around and go back to Jerusalem. They join the eleven original disciples and tell them, as best they can, about what happened to them, how their hearts were burning within them while they walked and listened to a stranger retelling them the story of God's covenantal love. And how, when the man broke the bread, their eyes finally saw him, recognizing the true nature of this stranger, comprehending the incomprehensible —Jesus was actually WITH us!!!

There was, I suppose, no more unlikely moment than that humble meal, at the end of the day, on the road to Emmaus. And you know what? Jesus is always right here with us too. So what do WE do? Do we sit in our grief, hardly believing that joy and life can come out of death and anguish?

Craig Barnes, a pastor and former President of Princeton Theological Seminary wrote an Easter essay for the *Christian Century*. He writes:

"I love the fact that in this story the risen Christ comes to two men in the midst of an ordinary, very human activity: taking a walk, dealing with a terrible loss. They weren't looking for him. They didn't even recognize him. Faith, this story suggests, does not come as a result of our intellectual search or struggle with ideas. Faith is not a product of studying theology, memorizing scripture, reciting creeds. Faith is not even produced much by churchgoing. Faith is a gift. Faith is what happens when, by God's good grace, a risen Christ confronts us in the middle of life and an ordinary experience becomes a sacred experience, an ordinary moment becomes a holy moment, and a truth deeper and more profound than what our minds can understand becomes momentarily clear."

Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and novelist, has been writing about Emmaus all his life. In his famous sermon on this passage he says, "The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears reveal only. . . a gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being and imagination. . . what we may see is Jesus himself." (*The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 87–88)

Jesus Christ comes to us in ways that are far more modest, in the daily round, unexpectedly, a sunrise, a symphony, the touch of a beloved's hand, the sound of a child's laughter, a meal shared becomes the means of grace, a sacrament, a promise that the holy is present, that the risen Christ is present.

Do you ever see him—really see him, PERCIEVE him—in church and also in the ordinary, unlikely moments and experiences that make up our lives: even the sad moments, the moments of loss and grief, particularly in the moments the risen Christ is present with a love more powerful than death?

The question that the Easter story asks of us is not only, “Do we believe in the resurrection?”

The pressing question today is: “Have you encountered the risen Christ?”