

# *On a Road to Emmaus*

April 30, 2017

A Reading from the Gospel According to Luke

Chapter 24:13-35

<sup>13</sup>And look, on the same day, two of them were traveling to a village about seven miles from Jerusalem, whose name was Emmaus, <sup>14</sup>and they were speaking to each other about all that took place. <sup>15</sup>And it happened that during their talk and discussion, Jesus came near and went with them. <sup>16</sup>But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>He said to them, "What are these words you are exchanging with each other as you walk along?" And they stood still, downcast. <sup>18</sup>One of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered and said to him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know what happened there in these days?" <sup>19</sup>He said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet powerful in act and word, before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup>and how our priests and leaders handed him over to the judgment of death and they crucified him. <sup>21</sup>We had hoped that he was going to redeem Israel. But now it is already the third day since these things occurred. <sup>22</sup>And more, some women among us amazed us. They went at dawn to the tomb, <sup>23</sup>and did not find the body and came back saying they saw a vision of angels who say that he is alive. <sup>24</sup>Then some of us went back to the tomb, and found it as the women said but did not see him." <sup>25</sup>And he said to them, "O what fools, and slow of heart you are to believe all that the prophets spoke! <sup>26</sup>Did not the Messiah have to suffer this and enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup>And starting with Moses and through all the prophets, he explained to them all the things in the Torah concerning himself.

<sup>28</sup>And as they approached the village that they were traveling to, he pretended to be going on further. <sup>29</sup>They entreated him, saying, "Stay with us. It is almost evening and the day

has fallen.” So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup>And it happened that as he reclined at the table with them, he took the bread and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. But he vanished from them. <sup>32</sup>They said to each other, “Were our hearts not burning inside us when he talked to us on the road as he revealed the Torah to us?” <sup>33</sup>And they rose up in that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those with them. <sup>34</sup>They said, “The lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon!” <sup>35</sup>Then they described the things on the road and how they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

—Translated by Willis Barnstone

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Luke says after he’s risen, Christ reappears to different people in different ways. He’ll comfort friends on the Mount of Olives, hover near Stephen as he lies dying, slam into Saul one afternoon on a road to Damascus. Christ reveals himself not just to some early saints, but to the discouraged—Cleopas and someone who’s not even given a name.

Writers long afterward tell us Cleopas is Jesus’ uncle, Joseph’s brother. His companion may be his wife, who wept under the Cross. Neither’s identified anywhere else although Mark says that Jesus spooks two disciples “*as they were walking into the country*” (16:12). Like Mary, they run to tell people, but they’re not believed.

Emmaus was just a cluster of huts up in the hills, perhaps. Not where you’d go looking for a Messiah, until today.

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In today’s text, it is already evening; daylight’s begun to fade. Three people, one of whom remains a stranger, talk as they hurry on. Christ’s resurrection is just a rumor, nobody’s heard any details. Simple souls don’t even know whom they’re walking with.

Chances are, though, much of the time, neither would we.

You may have heard this before on the news. I got it from the *Washington Post*. Ten years ago, a violinist played at a Metro station in DC almost an hour before he packed up and went home. Six people stopped to hear, tossed him a few bills.<sup>1</sup>

He turned to be Joshua Bell, who's won awards all over the world. He'll play at Orchestra Hall next November. The cheapest seats, up in the clouds, cost eighty-five dollars.

Hundreds rushed by in the subway because no one believed one of the greats would show up there and decide to play. So he became just a beggar, holding a hand out for spare change. For most of them, that's all he'd ever be. . . .

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Any Sunday at all, many people come to church worn down and anxious. We may be lawyers or nurses or teachers, we're good at what we do, but we're uneasy in the realm of the holy.

We may like to mull over *ideas* about God—we all wonder, *Why are we here? Where are we from? Where will we go some day?* That being said, we don't *expect* to be *electrified*, to actually feel the presence of God in the air.

Maybe, sometimes, when a song overwhelms you, you've been caught by surprise—and almost sensed something you can't explain.

What about the rest of the time?

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Emily C. Heath made this connection in "On the Road to Emmaus: A Sermon for May 8, 2011." Online text @ <https://emilycheath.com/2011/05/09/on-the-road-to-emmaus-sermon-for-may-8-2011/>

The rest of the time we have the scriptures, stories and ancient hymns, that reveal something else each time we look at them. Each time we notice someone or some verse we didn't see before; maybe a hidden door opens, a room lights up.

Martin Luther takes note of how patiently Jesus decodes the difficult books of the law for two poor people along a dusty road. Luther says if we also head that way— follow the path of Luke, Matthew and Mark—difficult things will be made plain for us as well.

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The moment Cleopas and his companion realize the stranger at supper is Christ caught the attention of painters throughout the Renaissance.

Rembrandt depicts this scene several times. As a young man, he surrounds Christ with light—Jesus' serene face *glows* like a candle in the dark. As he gets older, though, Rembrandt discovers a subtler, more personal kind of awe, shining in the eye of one of the witnesses. Just as Cleopas *sees who it is*, a servant sets a plate on the table, not noticing anything much at all.

Not long before, Diego Velazquez also captured this scene—here, though a slave bringing supper's the first to see. Denise Levertov describes this painting in her poem, "*The Servant Girl at Emmaus*"—

She listens, listens, holding  
her breath. Surely that voice  
is his—the one  
who had looked at her, once, across the crowd,  
as no one ever had looked?  
Had seen her? Had spoken as if to her?

Surely those hands were his,  
taking the platter of bread from hers just now?  
Hands he'd laid on the dying and made them well?

Surely that face—?

The man they'd crucified for sedition and blasphemy.  
The man whose body disappeared from its tomb.  
The man it was rumored now some women had seen this morning, alive?

Those who had brought this stranger home to their table  
don't recognize yet with whom they sit.  
But she in the kitchen, absently touching  
    the winejug she's to take in,  
a young Black servant intently listening,  
swings round and sees  
the light around him  
and is sure.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph Wood Krutch, a critic from the Thirties, says that, "*The rare moment is not when there is something worth looking at, but when we are capable of seeing.*"

*When we are able to see, God stands revealed.*

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The strangest moment in our gospel story comes when Christ *disappears*, and his companions gape in wonder at a tray of broken bread. They have witnessed a miracle—but it's too late to ask questions now. Christ has more work to do, just somewhere else.

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<sup>2</sup> One may find the poem—and the painting as well—online @

<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Lent/e-Emmaus.html>

A vanishing like this one isn't so rare. Each of us sometimes has moments of intimacy when we truly trust, even surrender to someone else. Another person is present to us with such grace, such tenderness, we forget why or how we lived apart.

Yet that Other, who seems as real to us as our own body and blood, doesn't and somehow cannot stay. Relationships change. Someone gets restless. Someone's not satisfied. We can't recapture those moments we shared in paradise.

Human love may be intense but it can be fragile, too. Like the manna that once fed the Jews, it can't be purchased, or preserved. We can't earn it once it is gone. We only hope that it will come again.

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Even though Luke lets us know where to look, the village of Emmaus is one place in scripture tourists cannot find. It isn't on the map—but I've been there; perhaps, you've been there, too. Emmaus is where we run out of hope, and break down, and give up.

Fred Buechner claims "*Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go*" when we're convinced it's all over, we're finished; we can't make it right.<sup>3</sup>

*We'd hoped Jesus would be the one to save us*—that's what Cleopas says. We'd hoped the shadow we saw on the x-ray was a false alarm. We'd hoped the first signs of forgetfulness wouldn't indicate. . . . We'd hoped he'd quit drinking, find a job, even; get straightened out. . . .

*"We'd hoped"*—the sentence starts—"*but not anymore.*"

Emmaus, friends, isn't really a town. It's a spiritual crisis. . . .

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, ***The Magnificent Defeat*** (Chicago: Seabury P, 1966), p. 85.

*“And [then] it happened. . . as he reclined at the table with them, he took the bread and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened. . . they recognized him.”*

Through body language—in the way he used his hands. They didn’t hear the holy angels sing. The sky didn’t split open all of a sudden, no. Nothing at all happened like that.

Honestly, though—*“Is not this the way God. . . often enters our lives? Not in the miraculous, but in the ordinary taking, blessing, breaking, and giving.”*<sup>4</sup>

In the embrace of someone we may barely know. Sound of the rain early one night. Softly as that.

People who come to church—a few whose names may not know—come seeking answers to all sorts of questions—*How do I live? What does God want?* Maybe a few wind up listening to me; more of them, though, are looking at *you*, hoping that you embody what faith is about. That’s what our mission statement says week after week.

No one can listen, help, reach out all of the time—sometimes we can’t. Sometimes we’re scared, or we feel lost. The open secret, though—and what I love about this congregation—is that we can and do take turns.

God bless you all.

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Jeffrey M. Gallagher, “Living the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary,” in **The Christian Century**, April 12, 2017, p. 20.